THE BLACK BAT

THE BLACK BAT'S CRUSADE

pulp classics by G. Wayman Jones

THE BLACK BAT'S FLAME TRAIL

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THE BLACK BAT

Volume 4

Presenting TWO Complete Book-length novels from the files of Tony Quinn, Nemesis of Crime, as originally edited by Leo Margulies and Mort Weisinger

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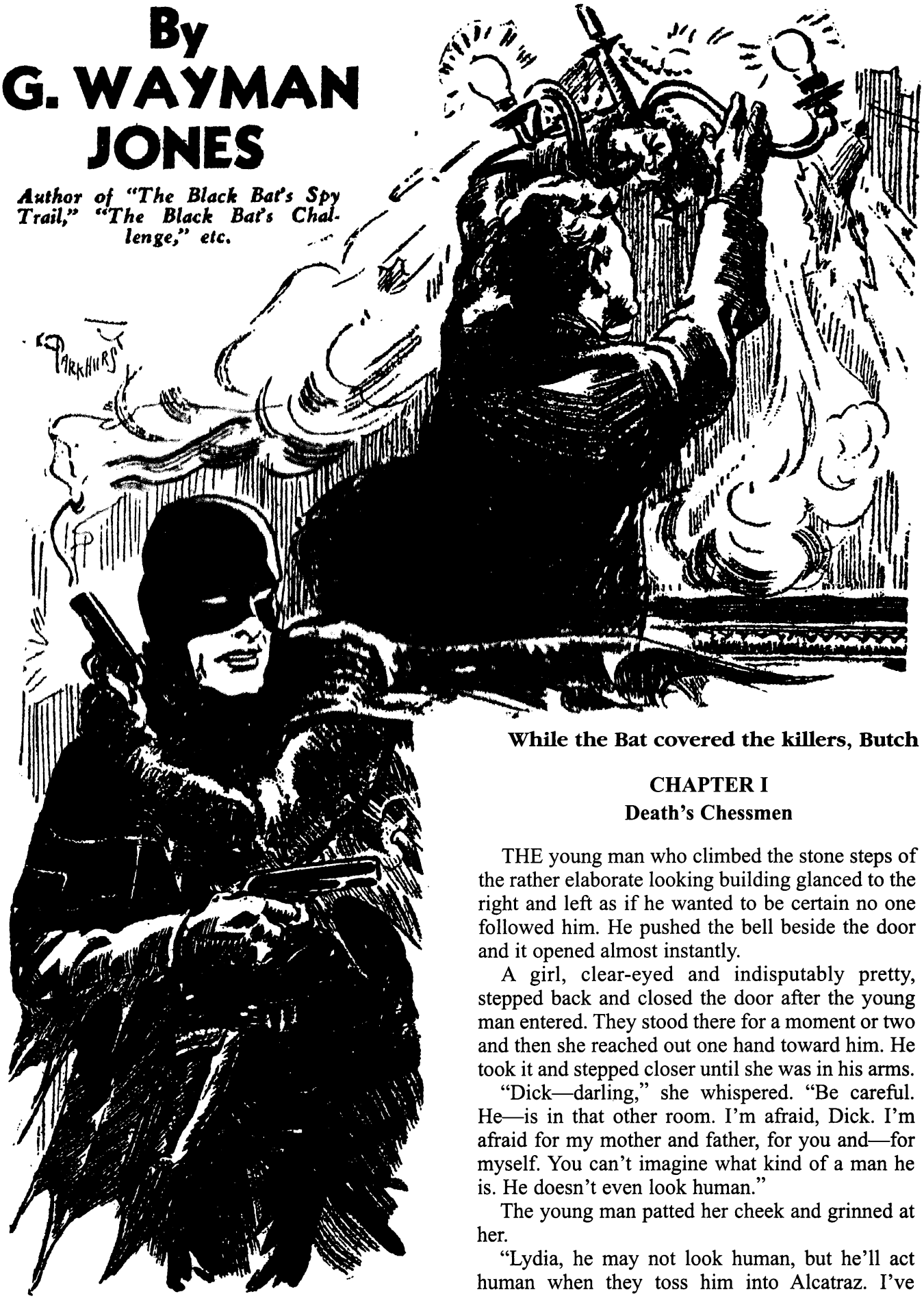
THE BLACK BAT'S

By G. WAYMAN JONES

Author of "The Black Bat's Spy Trail," "The Black Bat's Challenge," etc.



While the Bat covered the killers, Butch

CHAPTER I
Death's Chessmen

THE young man who climbed the stone steps of the rather elaborate looking building glanced to the right and left as if he wanted to be certain no one followed him. He pushed the bell beside the door and it opened almost instantly.

A girl, clear-eyed and indisputably pretty, stepped back and closed the door after the young man entered. They stood there for a moment or two and then she reached out one hand toward him. He took it and stepped closer until she was in his arms.

"Dick—darling," she whispered. "Be careful. He—is in that other room. I'm afraid, Dick. I'm afraid for my mother and father, for you and—for myself. You can't imagine what kind of a man he is. He doesn't even look human."

The young man patted her cheek and grinned at her.

"Lydia, he may not look human, but he'll act human when they toss him into Alcatraz. I've

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swung himself at them from the chandelier.

discovered plenty about the great Dr. Zuro. Lead me to him, and watch how I take him in."

The girl walked down the hallway, turned into a doorway hung with heavy purple drapes and vanished. The young man unconsciously reached for his hip pocket and loosened the automatic that was nestled there. Somehow he had lost all the self-assurance which weeks of hard work had built up; perhaps it was the atmosphere of this place—or Lydia's horror of the man who owned it.

She came out of the room, held the drapes apart and regarded him coldly.

"You may go in, Mr. Bennett. Dr. Zuro is ready for you now."

The young man who was announced as Bennett walked between the drapes, felt them close behind him. For a moment he seemed puzzled. He looked into a huge room that seemed to be more of a temple than an ordinary living room.

There was an altar in one corner, a crude affair that clashed violently with the rest of the sleek, up-to-date furniture.

Above the altar hung various pictures of symbolic gods. A platter piled high with food occupied the center of the altar and on each side of it rested a gourd. Propped in the corner was a tall sword, sheathed but still deadly looking. Streamer banners of gaudy colors stretched on both sides of the altar and were pinned to the wall about five feet on either side.

"Ah—Mr. Bennett," a suave, low voice said. "I see you are familiar with the altar of voodoo. Won't you sit down, please?"

BENNETT, startled by the unexpected voice, whirled half around before he saw a man seated behind a small table. There was a bluish light pouring down on him and Bennett was aware that the entire room was lit by various shades of this same color.

He moved closer and his eyes grew wide.

THE man behind the desk was probably as grotesque a person as Bennett had ever seen. His shoulders were as wide as those of a gorilla, his neck existed for a space of about two inches, and firmly planted on it was a massive head. The man's skin wasn't white, nor was it dark.

But it was the features of this man that made Bennett suck in a sharp breath. They were finely chiseled, in sharp contrast to the rest of his body. He had black eyebrows that were drawn like the lines of a fine, soft pencil above his eyes which slanted in an almost Mongoloid pitch. His nose was narrow and predatory. He had thin, pink lines for lips.

Bennett almost automatically sat down in a chair on the other side of the small table. A glance told him it was a chessboard and that this man had apparently been engrossed in studying certain moves of the chessmen. Bennett didn't look closely at the chessmen. Dr. Zuro dominated the room too much to permit the attention of a visitor to be elsewhere but on him.

"You come to me for advice and help, is it not so, Mr. Bennett?" Zuro asked suavely.

Bennett regained possession of his wits with an effort.

"Yes, yes, of course. Dr. Zuro—I know you are probably the greatest exponent of voodoo in the United States. I heard your name mentioned with reverence even among the more celebrated *papalois* in Haiti. Here people laugh at voodoo and what it can do. I'm not that kind, Doctor. I know what voodoo is capable of performing. That's why I'm here—to get an *ouanga*, a death *ouanga*. One of those charms that will kill an enemy of mine. Kill him silently and without the slightest clue. I'm willing to pay—plenty. You will help me?"

Zuro's strange face remained impassive.

"Perhaps, Mr. Bennett. It is not a difficult thing to do. I am glad to learn that you are a believer in voodoo. It makes things far simpler for me. There is no need to explain that voodoo enables one to read a man's mind. You, for instance, Mr. Bennett. In your pocket is a badge, crested with the insignia of the Federal Bureau of Investigation. In your mind lies the idea that you can trick me into revealing some of my plans or, perhaps preparing for you an *ouanga* which could be used in evidence against me!"

The young man half started up from his chair. Then he relaxed again, although every nerve was on edge. How had this eerie creature known he was a G-Man and that his visit was solely to trap Zuro into some admission which would enable him to carry out his investigation?

Zuro calmly folded both arms across his massive chest. His lips were curled in a scornful grimace.

"Look down at the chessboard, Mr. Randall. Oh yes, I almost forgot to mention the fact that I know your real name is Randall and that the girl who poses as my secretary is really Lydia Martin and that she is greatly in love with you. I know all things, Mr. Randall. Now look at the chessmen."

RANDALL glanced down and his eyes flashed wide. The chessmen, fashioned after the likenesses of a pawn, a king, queen and bishop, were carved in the images of skulls—human skulls. They seemed to be leering up at the G-Man in a savage delight at his consternation. He seized one and held it closer to his eyes, then he looked at Zuro.

"Zuro," he said in a steady voice, "these skulls you use for chessmen will send you straight into the electric chair. You are under arrest. It makes little difference now that I came to you under the guise of another person. Whatever you might have told me before, now becomes unnecessary. These chessmen link you to murder—just as strongly as you'll be linked to my wrist with handcuffs."

Randall suddenly arose, put the flat of both hands against the chessboard and prepared to hurl himself upon the massive creature who regarded him with unblinking eyes. Then Zuro moved and so fast that Randall didn't have a chance to reach his gun or carry his attack further. Something glistened in the bluish light. Something that felt like a stream of molten steel struck the back of Randall's hand. He looked down and tuned deathly pale. A knife pinned his hand to the table.

Zuro was out of the chair quickly. He moved behind Randall, extracted his heavy gun. Then he returned to his chair and placed Randall's gun tantalizingly within the G-Man's reach. His own automatic he placed on the table before him. They stared at each other for a moment like men in a tableau of horrible pain and terror.

Then Zuro found handcuffs and chained Randall's free hand to the chair. Randall was as helpless as though strapped with a dozen lengths of leather. He couldn't move the hand impaled by the knife. The slightest twitch of the muscles brought sharp waves of agony through his arm.

"Damn you," he ground out. "I should have come in here with a gun in my hand and killed you!"

Zuro smiled slightly and resumed his chair.

"Yes—that would have been one way, Mr. Randall. It would have saved you a great deal of pain, for then you would have died instantly. You stumbled onto a figment of the truth somehow. Don't deny it. Recognition of those chessmen that look like skulls proved it to me. Perhaps you will tell me everything you have discovered?"

"I'll tell you nothing," Randall shouted and then grimaced as he tugged at the impaled hand. Blood was already oozing out of the wound, running in a tiny rivulet along the table and creating a miniature, crimson waterfall over the edge.

ZURO shrugged those massive shoulders.

"It makes little difference. The girl is, of course, also a spy. Her mother is one of my best clients, very free with her contributions. Her father detests me because of this. The girl was planted here days ago, but I knew that from the very first moment she stepped into my home. So both of you are spies and deserving of a spy's fate. I think, Randall, that I shall allow Lydia to kill you. It will be a very pleasant experiment for me. Not so pleasant for you. Of, course, if you wish to talk—"

"You're crazy," Randall cried. "You're as crazy as that altar of yours or the things you profess to represent. You're a fake, Dr. Zuro. I'm not afraid of you."

Zuro clapped his hands. The curtains at the other end of the room parted and a brawny, grinning man came in, dragging Lydia behind him.

"Tie her to the pillar," Zuro ordered.

"It is a pity," Zuro went on when this was done. "She is much too young and beautiful to die, but—it is out of my hands now. Randall—the girl you love will die within the next few moments. When we are all satisfied that she is dead, I shall bring her back to life again. Impossible? I read that in your eyes. But it isn't. You have heard of zombies, of course? People who are dead, but live again. People who exist without minds of their own, without control of their own wills? That is what the girl shall be—a zombie. And she will obey the order that I give her. The order to kill you, Randall. Kill you just as you sought to kill me. For weeks you worked against me, digging up clues here and there, delving into matters that were none of your affair."

Zuro's voice rose in anger and his eyes sparkled with hatred. Randall tried desperately to pull his impaled hand free, but the movement only caused him more pain.

Zuro walked over to where Lydia Martin was bound, her eyes wide and horror-filled. Without a word Zuro extended his hands and closed his fingers about her throat. She didn't utter a sound. It was almost as though she had lost her reason. He squeezed and Randall began yelling at the top of his voice.

Randall was no coward, but his voice was the only weapon of defense left to him. He was giddy from pain and loss of blood. The burly man who had dragged Lydia into the room was standing beside Randall now and he held a gun in his fist. For five minutes Randall was forced to sit there and watch the girl he loved being strangled to death. A vein in his forehead throbbed visibly. He closed his eyes and turned away from the grisly scene. Then, suddenly, those eyes opened to mere slits and flashed to the left.

The burly guard stood there, but he was looking at Zuro. Randall's fingers moved very slowly and sluggishly. He had hardly any strength left in them. Sweat poured down his face. The forefinger curled slightly and extended out straight until it touched the base of one skull-engraved chessman. Carefully Randall brought that weird object closer until he managed to use his finger as a lever and slid the object toward him. Then, with his knees, he raised the table slightly. The chessman rolled through the pool of blood, off the table and onto Randall's lap.

WHEN he turned to look at Zuro again, he saw that the grim deed was finished. Lydia had been released from her bonds and lay limp in a chair, her face purple, her chest muscles stilled. Zuro was calmly feeling her pulse. He glanced at Randall.

"She is quite dead. I am sorry I cannot release you to prove this to your own satisfaction. Now you shall see what voodoo is, my doubting friend. When Lydia returns to life, she will be a walking dead woman, obeying my commands with no reasoning of her own."

Zuro summoned the guard with a jerk of his head. Lydia was carried over to the corner occupied by the altar. The guard laid her down gently before it. Zuro removed two of the gourds from the altar, mixed a few drops from the contents of each in a wooden bowl. He knelt beside Lydia, forced the liquid between her lips and then arose. He stepped back three paces and muttered something in a language that Randall didn't understand.

A moment later he was certain that he didn't even understand his own senses. Lydia was moving. Certainly she had been dead. Zuro's talon-like fingers had prevented any oxygen from reaching

her lungs for five long minutes. She hadn't been breathing as the burly guard carried her to the altar. Yet she seemed to breathe now. Her chest moved up and down as regularly as it might in normal life. Zuro thrust an arm under her shoulders and raised her. She reached her feet and stood there, swaying, both eyes tightly shut. Slowly Zuro moved a hand before those eyes and they opened.

Now Randall experienced the final horror of the last few minutes. Those eyes were blank and dead. They simply stared into nothingness. The eyelids were white and bloodless, framing the eyes like a horrible halo. Randall discovered that his throat was too dry to speak. He forgot about the agony racing up and down his impaled hand. He forgot everything but that dreadful sight of Lydia who had been dead and was now alive, a walking corpse.

Zuro's hand darted beneath his coat and extracted a knife. He held it by the blade and extended the weapon toward Lydia. He uttered a sharp command and she accepted the weapon without the slightest change of expression on her face. Zuro moved to one side. The girl held the knife high, almost level with her forehead. Her steps were slow and deliberate, and no other part of her body moved.

Randall watched her approach. He shouted her name over and over again, but she kept on drawing closer and closer, the knife still held high, the gleaming blade ready for a death thrust.

RANDALL'S spinning brain could absorb no more. The weakness caused by pain was aggravated by horror. The room began spinning. Zuro, arms folded across his massive chest, seemed to grow and grow in size until he filled the entire room. The object streaking by Randall's gaze became hazy. A blackness swept over him. With a sigh he fell forward, his head landing on the impaled arm, his cheek becoming smeared with his own blood.

Randall didn't feel the slice of the blade as it bit through his back and penetrated his heart!

Five minutes later, Zuro was busily engulfed in sweeping the skull-carved chessmen into a small velvet sack. He was issuing orders as he did so and—Zuro made a mistake. He did not count the chessmen.

"Riga," he told his hireling in a flat voice, "we must leave this place shortly after darkness. No one knows who lives here, none of my clients ever came to this address. But Randall discovered it and what one man can do, others may also accomplish. We have Mrs. Martin and that idiot husband of hers to contend with also. He is to be put out of the way before he really becomes a menace to us. I shall take care of that, Riga, but not until Mrs. Martin has been brought here. I must be certain she has not talked."

"What about him?" Riga pointed to the corpse draped over the chess table.

Zuro shrugged. "Let him remain. It would be dangerous to try to move him now. You have your orders. Get busy and, Riga—don't fail."

Riga shivered, picked up a leather pouch from a table and thrust it into his pocket. He sped out of the house, glad of even the waning sunlight. Riga liked easy money and Dr. Zuro passed out plenty of it. Riga also liked power and authority which Zuro would one day likewise dole out to those who served him well. Riga would be faithful—until he got what he wanted.

CHAPTER II
Ouanga Bag

CAROL BALDWIN was young, blond and decidedly nice to look at. To all appearances she might have been a photographer's prize model hurrying home from a hard day before the lights and lenses. Tucked under one arm were three rather massive books, all worn and old.

Carol had spent several hours in various stores devoted to selling rare books before she had found them. They were all deep treatises on voodoo and all its related mysticism.

Carol knew something about voodoo herself and found it interesting, but the man for whom these books were intended actually devoured them. He was imbued with a desire to learn everything known about this form of the black art. For months voodoo had grown until its tentacles were spreading in a slimy dragnet all over the city, taking in fools with more money than sense. Making even serious minded people kow-tow to someone called a *papaloi* or high priest of the cult. The meetings were well attended, in fact many were actually crowded. Carol had been to several, a proxy for the man who employed her.

Carol Baldwin was no photographer's model, nor rich man's secretary. She was an active member of a tiny band devoted to ferreting out and eradicating criminals. Carol Baldwin was the one woman in the world who knew the identity of the Black Bat.

She knew this mysterious marauder of the underworld as Tony Quinn who had once been a promising district attorney until one day in court thugs, trying to destroy evidence, blinded him with acid and seared his face into a mass of ugly scars. She knew how Tony Quinn had visited specialists all over the world and been told that no surgeon could make those acid-burned eyes function again. She knew how one night he had sat in the depths of black despair, wondering what he could do,

wondering if he was to be a helpless man, cursed with an eternal blackness for the remainder of his life.

That night Carol Baldwin had appeared. At her suggestion Tony Quinn had secretly slipped away, visited a small Midwestern town and there, under the hands of a little known surgeon, the burned portions of his eyes had been replaced with healthy sections taken from a dying man. Weeks later, Tony Quinn could see once more, but only a few people knew this. Later he learned that the donor of the healthy eye segments had been Carol's father, doomed to death by the bullet of a cowardly killer.

Into Quinn's life, then, had come Silk Kirby. Silk, once a confidence man par excellence, became Tony Quinn's valet and handy man. Next had come Butch O'Leary, massive hulk of a man in sharp contrast with Silk, and Butch proved to be the often necessary brawn of a quartette devoted to an endless fight against crime. Tony Quinn became the Black Bat; and Silk, Butch and Carol became the Black Bat's aides.

Independently wealthy, Tony Quinn retained his pose of a hopelessly blind man during the daytime. By night he prowled as the Black Bat and his name had become a curse upon those who lived by crime. He assumed a hood that covered his scarred face. A cape which could be spread out, wing-like and ribbed to simulate the wings of a bat, formed the rest of his symbolic guise. The image of the Bat was enough to make the toughest man in gangland wonder if it was too late to mend a badly broken career.

THE Bat fought his enemies with their own weapons. He met force with force and furtive skulking with a stealth that amazed those against whom he operated. For during those months of blindness Tony Quinn's other senses had developed to an astonishing degree. Then, with the return of his sight, nature seemed to repay him for the months of torture. Tony Quinn discovered that he could see in darkness as plainly as he could in light. Shadowy objects were clearly visible to his eyes. Barriers or traps, masked by darkness, stood out vividly for him.

These thoughts were flashing through Carol's mind as she walked briskly along one of the quieter streets of the city. She saw an expensive coupé round the corner and draw to the curb in front of a small, exclusive jewelry shop. A woman stepped out and then things happened.

Carol had a good look at the woman. She was about forty-five, extremely well dressed and with the poise that went with money. A diamond bracelet sparkled tantalizingly from her wrist. She took a few steps toward the entrance of the jeweler's shop when a squat, ugly looking man darted out of a doorway

THE BLACK BAT

ten yards down the street. He held something in his hand and he rushed straight up to the woman. Impulsively Carol stepped back behind a parked car.

The burly man thrust something into the woman's hand, looked around furtively and saw no one. He nodded curtly to the woman and then ran up the street to vanish around the corner. Carol, who had thought that the burly thug-like man was about to attack the woman and seize her bracelet, had been primed for a quick dash to the rescue. She had taken a small but very efficient automatic out of her purse, and the books on voodoo were perched on the fender of the parked car.

But now she watched the woman stare at the man's retreating back. The woman then looked down at the object he had handed her and uttered a sharp, yet low, cry. She drew off her gloves, seemed to be prying at something. A moment later she turned halfway around, her knees buckled, and she sagged back against the coupé in a dead faint.

No one was on the quiet side street. Carol rushed over to the woman's side and helped her into a more comfortable position. She picked up one limp hand to massage it and restore circulation. There was something clutched in that hand. Grimly Carol pried the fingers open. A heavy, small object fell to the sidewalk. She scooped it up and held a tiny meticulously engraved image of a human head before her startled eyes. It was a man's head, carved out of solid lead. There was a tiny dagger piercing the throat.

Carol felt her own throat go dry. She looked around quickly and found a small leather pouch which the unconscious woman had dropped. Hastily she dumped the contents into the palm of her hand and shivered as the motley objects became visible. There were small pieces of bone, two chicken feathers, one black, the other white, whose tips were stained with what seemed to be blood. There was a luck stone, several unidentifiable leaves, or possibly herbs, also in the bag.

"Ouanga!" Carol was startled at the sound of her own voice. "Voodoo!"

SOMEONE shouted and Carol looked up. A man was yelling for a policeman. Carol hastily tucked the leaden head and the *ouanga* bag into her purse.

"This woman had a dizzy spell," she explained to the patrolman who ran up. "I saw her fall and was trying to help her. Better call an ambulance."

But the woman opened her eyes before the patrolman could send anyone to phone.

"I—I'm quite all right," she said. "Quite all right, thank you. Just help me into my car. It is nothing. I—I haven't been well lately. My heart—"

The patrolman, duly impressed by the diamond bracelet, the quality of her clothes and the make of the coupé , helped her into the car. Suddenly she turned her head and looked down at the sidewalk.

"Was—was there anything that fell out of my purse?" she asked in a strained voice. "A small leather pouch—the kind you keep jewelry in. Yes—that's it—I had an old piece of jewelry which I was bringing into this store."

The patrolman looked for the pouch and then eyed Carol suspiciously.

"Ain't no purse here, lady. This girl was the first one to find you. Maybe she—"

"No—no, of course not," the woman in the car said quickly. "I was mistaken. I remember very well now. I left the pouch at home. Probably the excitement of realizing I had forgotten it brought on my dizzy spell. The girl is quite innocent, officer. Now may I go?"

Carol didn't wait to hear the patrolman caution the woman about care in driving home. She raced across the street. There were two cabs stalled while the drivers craned their necks looking at the excitement. Carol hailed both cabs. She had them wait while she ran to the corner, purchased a newspaper and hastily wrapped the books and the *ouanga* bag into them. She scrawled a brief message on a page of her address book, ripped it out and shoved the paper between the covers of one book. Then she handed the bundle to the first cab driver.

"Take this to 1195 Elsmere Road. A valet will be there waiting for it."

Carol paid him, added a good sized tip and on afterthought wrote down his hack license number. Then she climbed into the second cab.

"Follow that coupé." She indicated the car pulling away from the curb. "Keep it in sight and I'll add ten dollars to your meter."

The cab driver grinned at her. "Lady, for ten bucks I'd trail somebody to Alaska—that's how good business is with me."

The woman behind the wheel of the coupé was a good driver, weaving a path through the traffic that kept the taxi driver busy. But she missed more than one light as though there was a tremendous weight on her mind which kept the meaning of the ruby glow from penetrating her brain. She headed straight across town for eight blocks. Then she turned north, speeded up and twenty minutes later she stopped in front of a big house. But she seemed to change her mind for some reason and drove on another block. There she did stop, locked the car and walked briskly back toward the big house she had first given away as her objective.

CAROL paid off the driver, watched the woman admitted to the house and gave a short gasp of surprise. The man who let her in was the same squat individual who had thrust that *ouanga* bag into her hands. Carol didn't hesitate. If this happened to be one of the voodoo *houmforts*, or temples, she wanted to know it.

Tony Quinn would be intensely interested. Although voodoo flourished rankly in the city, no one seemed to be able to lay a finger on any of the meeting places of the cult, or even point out the leaders. This aura of mystery had been the first thing to arouse Tony Quinn's suspicions.

Carol crossed the street only after she was out of sight of the house. She hurried into a backyard, chambered over a low fence and soon found herself at the rear of the big house into which the woman had disappeared. She regarded the place doubtfully. It was almost dark, but she could see that the ordinary glass windows had been replaced with opaque glass, most of it colored a dark blue. One thing was in her favor. If she couldn't look into the house through those windows, no one could look out.

There was a cellar door and she examined this intently, working fast against the approach of darkness. She took a nailfile from her pocket and attacked the lock. Tony Quinn had taught her many secrets and picking locks happened to be one of the more simpler ones. Anyway the lock was cheap and big. Carol had that door open in five minutes.

Once the door closed behind her, she found that she was shrouded by inky darkness. She wasn't blessed with the Black Bat's ability to see in darkness and she scraped a match, held it high and then

made a straight line for the stairway. She crept up the steps quietly, gripping the small automatic between steady, cool fingers. The upstairs door wasn't even locked and she opened it a crack. She could look between heavy blue drapes that masked one doorway. They weren't pulled together and she was able to distinguish a pair of man's feet between them. An eerie bluish light came from that room and the quality of it rendered the place ghostly and unnatural.

Carol risked everything on a quick, noiseless dash to that draped door. She pulled the curtains apart another inch and then her eyes widened, her jaw dropped. The owner of that pair of legs was lying across a small table and there was a knife driven to the hilt in his back.

A scream rang out—a woman's scream! Carol quickly clapped her hands to her lips and turned pale until she realized that the scream hadn't come from her throat. She remembered the woman who had been given the *ouanga*. Grimly she forced herself to forget the dead man in the other room. She walked toward a wide staircase and started up it very carefully. So far she hadn't been spotted.

"If my luck only holds out," she half whispered to herself, "I'll have something to tell Tony. It's about time that I took an active part in his affairs. Maybe I'll learn the whole secret of this crazy voodoo business."

But Carol wouldn't have been quite so sure of herself if she could have spotted the pair of narrow eyes that peered between the blue drapes she had so recently left. A gun protruded from them and the man behind it sighted the weapon squarely at Carol's back. Then he seemed to recognize the fact that the unwelcome visitor was a woman. With a grunt he lowered the gun, grasped it by the barrel and began stalking his prey.

CHAPTER III
The Mute Death

TONY QUINN, erstwhile blindman, sat in the living room of his big house. He puffed slowly on a pipe, but his blank, dead eyes didn't flicker even with the leaping flames in the fireplace reflected in them. Tony Quinn had been blind long enough to know exactly how a blind man should look and act. He rarely went out of character even when in his home.

There were grim thoughts running through his mind, all of them concerned with voodoo. Through sources open to Silk and Butch O'Leary, many weird stories had come to Tony Quinn. Stories of men who had died suddenly, while in good health and with no trace of violence or poison. Influential men whose loss was keenly felt by the community.

The police had acted swiftly, but the coroner's report squelched any further investigation on their part.

The door chimes pealed sonorously and Silk came from somewhere at the rear of the house. Silk was slight of build, he was nearly bald and his face was thin and hawk-like. There was an agile brain under that smooth, shining skull, and suspicion constantly lurked in Silk's eyes. He had been on the run from the law too often in his day to let much escape him now. Even now he regarded the taxi driver who stood on the porch with none too much friendliness.

"A lady says I was to bring this bundle here," the taxi driver said. "There's a note in it, some place too, she says. She paid me."

"Okay. Thanks."

Silk carried the package into the living room.

"More of those books, sir," he told Quinn. "Carol must have been busy. She sent 'em by taxi."

Quinn's expression didn't change nor did he so much as turn his head in Silk's direction.

"Have a look at them," he ordered quietly. "The driver mentioned something about a note."

Silk blinked. "But how'd you hear him? The door was half closed and that driver didn't speak loudly."

"A blind man's hearing becomes acute," Quinn said dryly.

"Uh-huh—here's a note written on a small bit of paper and shoved into one of the books."

Silk's attitude changed as he read the message. His eyes grew narrower, his chin jutted out.

It said:

> Something happened. Middle-aged woman in coupé with plate 2CY9742 handed ouanga bag by a man who looked like an ape. She opened it, fainted and I got the bag. Am enclosing it. See for yourself. Following woman. Think she may put us on the trail of something big.

Quinn strained forward in his chair, almost forgetting the pose he was accustomed to assume. He gestured with one hand and Silk understood the implied command. He hastily drew the curtains at each window before he handed Quinn the *ouanga* bag. Quinn opened it and spilled the contents onto a table. Now his eyes were no longer blank and dead. They flashed in excitement and there was a little worried furrow across his forehead.

Light from a nearby table lamp, which Silk turned on, reflected gruesomely against the scars created by the searing acid. Quinn had many of them around the upper part of his face. They could have been cured by plastic surgery, but in order to follow his pose of a blind man—a man without hope

and not much interest in life—Quinn had decided to forego the surgery that might change his appearance.

He instantly picked up the man's head carved out of a leaden block. He held this up and uttered a grunt of surprise.

"This is the likeness of Felix Martin, a member of a prominent brokerage firm."

Silk studied the tiny miniature. "Nice bit of work, sir, but what's it doing in that sack with all that other junk? Look—a couple of bones, some feathers, a little stone. What is this?"

"Voodoo," Quinn said slowly. "*Ouanga*, Silk. See the tiny knife imbedded in the throat of this figure? That means Felix Martin will die of some condition of the throat. The other thing in the pouch are the mysterious ingredients of an *ouanga* bag. They spell the curse someone has placed upon Felix Martin. Silk, stay close to the phone. Carol may call and want us in a hurry. I only hope she hasn't shoved that pretty head of hers into a mess of trouble. Better contact Butch and have him stand ready, too. If Carol is trapped, I'll need all the help I can get."

"And you, sir?" Silk inquired.

Quinn was moving toward one of the high bookcases in the room. He pressed a hidden control and a section of wall swung out.

"I'll be in the laboratory. Come the moment you hear anything."

Quinn closed the door behind him and sat down on a laboratory bench. Here were all the chemicals and apparatus needed in criminological work. Microscopes, spectroscopes, ballistics devices, one whole section devoted to toxicology. Part of the floor was a trapdoor which led to stairs that descended into a tunnel. This ended in a garden house far at the rear of Quinn's estate. It gave him and his aides a secret means of coming and going without detection.

Quinn placed the metal head on a small stand and studied it with a magnifying glass. The keen, trained eyes told him that an expert worker in metal had created this amazing likeness of one of the city's best-known men. The other things in the bag revealed nothing of any value. The bones had come from some kind of fowl, the feathers were obviously from a chicken and stained with a chicken's blood. There was nothing here that might put Tony Quinn on the trail of those men who delved into the black arts of voodoo.

An hour passed by. Silk came into the lab and reported that no word had come from Carol. Quinn frowned. He didn't like it. Carol would have followed the woman and if she merely went home, or to some tea, she'd have reported the fact by now. Not hearing from Carol indicated that she had stumbled onto something big and was either too engrossed in getting all the details or—she was being forcibly detained.

QUINN opened a narrow locker and removed his regalia. He donned black, crepe-soled shoes, black clothing even to the shirt and over this he drew on the wing-like cape.

"As bad as that, sir?" Silk asked in a worried voice.

"As bad as that," Quinn repeated. "I'm afraid Carol has landed with both feet right into a mess of trouble. I'm going to see this man Felix Martin. He may know why an *ouanga* was prepared against him and who had it prepared. You are to stick by the phone. I'll call in when I get a chance. If you hear from Carol, she is to come here immediately and wait."

Silk pulled up the trapdoor. Tony Quinn, who had now become the Black Bat, descended the ladder quickly, ran along the tunnel and came out of the garden house cautiously. Police as well as the underworld would have given much to observe the Black Bat crawling out of that tunnel. There was one man who would have actually shivered in delight—Detective-Lieutenant McGrath.

Detective-Lieutenant McGrath had more than a hunch that Tony Quinn was the Bat. Time and again he had almost trapped the man who worked with the police more often than against them, but always the Bat had slipped through McGrath's fingers until McGrath had taken a solemn vow that he would never give up until the Bat was behind bars, unmasked and his identity flashed to the world. McGrath was as persistent as he was honest.

The Bat slipped through the gate, reached the sidewalk running beside his estate, and hurried toward a light car that was always parked in this spot. One of Butch's duties was to see that the car was available at all times and fully fueled. The Bat unlocked the door, slid behind the wheel and donned a wide-brimmed black felt hat. He turned the next corner and headed south.

Felix Martin lived in one of the fashionable sections of a suburb. At this hour of the night it was going to be hard to catch him alone or even at home, but the Bat had to risk it. More and more he realized that something had happened to Carol. He berated himself for letting her act as his aide, for encouraging her to take an active part in his campaign against crime. Long ago Quinn had realized that his regard for Carol was something more than friendship and admiration for a pretty girl. She sensed his attitude, but Tony Quinn was determined to follow a crusade against crime and so long as he did this, his life was constantly in jeopardy. It would have been unfair to express his true feelings to Carol.

McGRATH

He was showing them now, however, as he drove past Felix Martin's home and parked around the corner. His fists were clenched and his eyes beady as he strode resolutely toward a high hedge. He went over this with the grace of a stag. Now darkness concealed his movements, but it did not conceal other things to his eyes. He saw a garden chair so clearly that he even noticed its color scheme. He avoided a rake, carelessly dropped by some gardener, crossed the spacious estate next door to Felix Martin's and in a moment he was over another hedge and stalking Martin's home.

THERE were no lights lit on the second floor and only two on the first. The Bat crept beneath one of the lighted windows, drew himself up very slowly and looked into a cozy study. Felix Martin, the original of that skillfully carved leaden image, sat before a desk. He looked worried and kept running fingers through his thinning hair. There was a haggard slump about his mouth.

Felix Martin was worried—almost to the point of distraction. Things were happening in his household that all but stunned him. First his wife had fallen for voodoo and the men who operated the sect. Then Lydia had gone to investigate her mother's connections. She had met an agent of the F.B.I. similarly engaged and they had fallen in love. That much Felix Martin knew but from there on everything was blank.

Lydia had vanished, There had been no word from her for hours now and the F.B.I. agent's office reported that he hadn't contacted them. Then Martin's wife had failed to meet him as scheduled. Felix Martin emitted a long sigh and stretched one hand for the phone. He had decided to call in the police. One thing he did know was the home address of the man who operated the cult. Lydia had discovered that.

"Please don't touch the phone," a quiet voice said behind Martin.

The middle-aged banker swung around in his chair and stared at a man clad entirely in black. The intruder held an automatic in one fist, but somehow Martin got the idea it wouldn't be used. The eyes that looked out from the slits in the mask were friendly enough. Martin leaned back in his chair.

"I don't suppose you would like to have me call in the police," he said sourly. "They might want to look behind that mask."

"Exactly," the figure in black chuckled. "I know this is an intrusion, but you may hold information which I require. Do you own a car—a coupé — with license plates 2CY9742?"

"Why, yes. Yes, I do," Martin answered. Then he started up in alarm. "My wife has that car. She hasn't returned home. Something must have happened to her. If you know anything, talk, or by heavens I'll—"

The Bat's gun came up suggestively and Martin sat down again. The Bat moved around to the front of the desk and sat on one corner of it.

"I know that this afternoon your wife was given a certain leather pouch called an *ouanga* bag. In it was a fetish made to curse you, Felix Martin. If voodoo is on the level and its fetishes work, you're a marked man, slated for quick and sudden death."

Martin waved his hand. "All bosh. They can concoct as many of those crazy things as they wish so long as they are made against me. I don't believe in any of the trash. But my wife does. She was given that fetish for a purpose. Then she disappeared. And my daughter—I've had no word from her for hours and she's in this Dr. Zuro's home."

"Dr. Zuro?" The Bat asked quickly. "Who is he?"

Martin hedged a little. "I don't see why I should tell you everything I know. Take off the mask, face me man to man, and I'll talk. Why, you may even be one of those devils come here to torment me."

"I'm the Black Bat," was the quiet reply. "Voodoo has struck your home, Mr. Martin. It's invaded other homes and there is a reason for it. I'm trying to find out what lies behind this so-called new rage of society. My intentions are of the best. If I can help you, I certainly shall. Somehow you have discovered something important. I must know it."

Martin rubbed his chin thoughtfully, looked at the Bat.

"So you're the Black Bat! Well, I've heard of you, and most of it has been to your credit. Perhaps you might do something to break up this foolish business. Listen—my wife has gone crazy over this fad. She attends those damned rituals, watches the voodoo priests wring a chicken's neck and offer it to some crazy snake god. She comes home filled with the idea that a knowledge of voodoo will give her greater powers over her fellow men. Nothing I say will change her. Very well, Mr. Black Bat, I'll tell you everything I know. I put the F.B.I. to work on this. I've influence and they acted when I made a complaint. My daughter Lydia went into the affair on her own. She got a job with a Dr. Zuro, one of the leaders of the cult. She even visited him at his home, which is supposed to be kept secret because all the damned fool women who adhere to the cult might pester him after hours. She discovered things. You might check on a man named Victor Hoffman. He seems to be under this Zuro's thumb."

"Where does this Dr. Zuro live?" the Bat asked quickly. "Give me the address."

Martin swung toward his desk in businesslike fashion, picked up a pencil and moved a pad closer. Suddenly he raised one hand to his throat. The next instant he was on his feet. The chair he occupied fell over backward. Martin's face was suffused with flecks of red, as though he was suffering from some terrific internal hemorrhage. Alternately the flesh became deathly white and then spotted again. His jaws were moving. He was trying to speak, but no sound came from his lips. He kept clawing at his throat as the Bat raced around the desk to support him with one arm.

"The address," the Bat said sharply. "The address, Martin. You can't speak—write it. Write it, man! Your daughter and your wife are in danger. Hear me! Write the address of Zuro!"

MARTIN was sagging toward the floor. He no longer tried to ease some ghastly pain in his throat. Life was flowing out of his veins fast. But one hand dropped beside the pencil and weak fingers curled around it. The Bat lifted the limp hand and placed it on the pad of paper. Slowly the fingers began drawing numbers. Then letters, until the final stroke was completed. Then Martin's fingers relaxed their hold on the pencil and he sagged in the Bat's arms.

The Bat lowered him to the floor, opened his vest and slid a hand beneath his shirt. There was no heart beat. From the beginning the Bat knew that Martin was doomed. It was his throat that seemed to be the starting point. The fetish of the *ouanga* bag had run true to form. The knife in the throat of the leaden image had done its work well.

The Bat felt a trickle of perspiration run down his face. He was an ordinary man with the feelings and the impulses of an ordinary man. Voodoo in itself is a hideous, crawling thing, filled with horror and blood. He had seen it work for the first time. How could it strike this way? No one else had approached Martin. He had died quickly and with a complete paralysis of the throat. Such a thing was almost beyond the ken of man. It bordered on the ghostly, the supernatural.

Then the Bat shook off that ominous feeling, arose and studied the written words on the pad. 117 Reid Avenue was what Martin's dying fingers had fashioned. Only the indomitable will of a strong man had given him time enough to suspend death for a moment and get the words down.

The Bat ripped several other pages from the pad so that there would be no impression on any of the blank ones. Then he picked up the phone in his gloved hands and dialed police headquarters. In a moment Lieutenant McGrath's dour voice came ever the wire.

"This," McGrath was told, "is the Black Bat. Now don't try to trace the call and send radio patrol cars for me. I'll be gone before they turn on their sirens. Listen, Lieutenant, and listen well. Felix Martin was just murdered. I said murdered even though your coroner will probably report his death as due to heart failure. I'm asking a favor of you, one that will benefit both of us in the long run. Have a careful analysis of Martin's throat muscles made. Look for a vegetable poison that paralyzes the throat. Get a report and keep it on you. I'll pay you a visit soon."

"If you do," McGrath shouted back, "it will be at your own risk. I'll nail you, Bat. I'll throw you into a cell. That's fair warning."

A click answered McGrath. Then seconds later only the master of the big house was left—and he was dead. Curtains at the far end of the room were wafted in by a breeze and through the inky darkness outside moved a mighty Nemesis of crime. The Bat's crusade was on!

CHAPTER IV
The Walking Corpse

HALFWAY up the staircase of the voodoo headquarters, Carol Baldwin heard a step creak behind her. She turned quickly and saw Riga trying to balance his weight with every step so he'd give no warning of his approach. But when Riga saw that he had been discovered, he emitted a hoarse yell

calculated to scare any girl into a terror-frozen statue. He missed fire on Carol for she didn't scare easily. Carol's small automatic came up. Riga saw it too late. He reached out a mighty paw toward Carol's ankle and she pulled the trigger.

The little gun gave a vicious spat and the bullet plowed into the stair close to Riga's head. He ducked and lost his balance. One foot slid off the stair. He clutched at the banister, missed and rolled down with thumps that shook the entire house.

Carol raced on up the steps. To descend would have been suicidal. She knew that Riga wasn't hit and he'd have time to get set for her. She reached the top of the steps, gun thrust out. There were a number of rooms along the corridor and to search each one would make too much noise. Carol decided she'd bitten off more than a mouthful and that under the present circumstances flight was better than facing a certain death. She remembered the dead man, slumped over the small table on the first floor. It was concrete, bloody proof that whoever ran this establishment certainly didn't balk at murder.

Then a door opened. Carol's finger tightened against the trigger of her gun. But she held her fire, for it was a girl who stepped out of the room. A girl who looked like a walking corpse. Her face was pallid as if in death, her eyes were blank, somewhat similar to Tony Quinn's eyes when he portrayed his character of a hopelessly blind man. The difference lay in the fact that this strange girl could see, for she stared directly at Carol.

She took half a dozen steps forward, and Carol slowly retreated. There was something sinister about this girl. She kept one hand behind her back and Carol had a vague idea that it clutched a weapon of some sort. No matter what this weird looking girl did, Carol knew she would never summon the courage to shoot her.

"Stop where you are," Carol said tensely. "Stop, or I'll shoot."

"It makes no difference," the girl said in a monotone that made Carol's blood run cold. If ever a dead person might speak, the voice would be similar to that intoned by this girl.

"Stop!" Carol repeated. "Listen to me. You're ill. You can't realize what you're doing."

"I'm going to kill you," the girl said, and kept on advancing. Carol was already at the top of the staircase and a quick glance told her that the ape-like man who had attacked her was already coming up the steps, scowling and prepared to do murder if necessary. Carol was between two deadly fires. A mad woman and a man with murder in his heart. She estimated her chances of charging down the steps and gave up the idea as being too risky.

Instead she suddenly charged forward, straight at the wide-eyed, staring girl whose hand had come from behind her back, gripping a knife. Carol lunged closer, secured a grip on the girl's wrist and twisted it with all the strength she could summon.

THE BLADE clattered to the floor. This strange girl had no more strength than an invalid.

Carol gave the girl a shove against the wall and started down the corridor. She was looking for an exit, any kind of an exit so long as it led her from this devil's playground. She streaked by the open doors until she reached one of the last rooms. She turned into it and something moved swiftly from behind. Carol tried to turn and get her gun into a position for shooting, but a strong arm encircled her throat, pulled her head back with an astounding force and at the same moment she felt the gun yanked out of her hand. Then she was picked up bodily, carried well into the room and thrown into a big chair.

Lights were turned on and Carol saw the manner, of beast that had seized her. She drew deep into the big chair, her eyes round in fear. The man who approached wore a purple robe and his shoulders were massive, his arms thick and powerful. There was a confident leer on his face and his fingers were spread wide, like those of a strangler.

Carol didn't scream. She realized that would do no good. Instead she steeled herself, grasped the arm of the chair and prepared to hurl her own puny form straight at this monster in an attempt to snake by him. She never got the chance. The doorway was suddenly filled with the bulk of Riga, the man who had almost captured her on the stairway. He moved into the room and the strange, deathly pale girl entered. She held one hand behind her back just as before. There was absolutely no expression on her face, but she advanced straight toward Carol.

When she was within reach, the hand behind her back jerked into view. The fingers were clenched, but they gripped no weapon. Apparently the strange girl thought she still held the knife. Her hand suddenly rose, but it paused in mid-air as if she fought an impulse to kill. The girl shivered violently as though she'd seen blood spurt out of a deep wound. She covered her eyes and backed away, sheer horror shining in them now, replacing the utter blankness that had existed there before.

The wide-shouldered man turned to face the strange girl, but this gave Carol no chance to escape. Riga moved forward to prevent that. The man spoke to the girl in a low voice. She obediently turned and walked out of the room. Carol could hear her measured steps as she paced down the corridor. Then the wide-shouldered man who was Dr. Zuro stepped closer to Carol.

"You will identify yourself at once," he snarled. "You will also tell me by what right you invaded

the privacy of my home. Do not lie. I will know if you do."

Carol racked her brain for an answer, but there was none. To reveal that she was working for the Black Bat would not only result in her quick death, but it might involve Tony Quinn in danger. Carol bit her lower lip and said nothing.

DR. ZURO turned to Riga. "Bring in Mrs. Martin. I believe she is responsible for this. The girl probably is a female detective employed by her. We shall soon find out."

Riga nodded and disappeared for a moment. When he returned, Mrs. Martin was shoved before him. She didn't look much like the society dowager the rotogravures published. Her grey hair was awry, her face was creased in a look of horror and fear. Zuro motioned toward Carol.

"This girl must have followed you here. Do you know her? The truth, you overstuffed fool."

"I—I have never seen her before in my—life," Mrs. Martin answered in a shaking voice.

Zuro seized her arms and stared into her eyes.

"You're lying. Have you forgotten what powers I possess? Have you forgotten that I can send your daughter to the electric chair for a cold-blooded murder? Realize what it would mean to you—to your social position. Now tell me the truth—"

Mrs. Martin bowed her head in resignation.

"I'll tell you all I know, Zuro. When that—that *ouanga* sack was placed in my hand, I—I fainted. When I recovered, this girl was at my side and the *ouanga* bag was gone. I couldn't demand it then for the police were there so I—I just let it go."

Zuro released her arm, approached Carol and bent down to stare malevolently into her eyes.

"Now you will speak, my very pretty golden-haired liar. You knew what was in the *ouanga* bag. You knew what it meant and you followed Mrs. Martin here to find out what connection she had with it. Don't lie. That's correct, isn't it?"

Carol nodded mutely. Then she wet her lips and seemed to find the use of a tongue almost paralyzed by terror.

"I—I'm a reporter," she managed. "There has been so much of this—this voodoo business going on. Of course I knew what the *ouanga* bag meant. I also recognized Mrs. Martin and I naturally wanted to find out why it had made her faint."

"Where is the bag?" Zuro demanded. "Whom did you contact after you recognized its meaning?"

Carol shrugged. "Maybe I'll talk, but under my own terms. First of all I want a cigarette. I have them in my handbag."

ZURO snatched the purse from Carol's hand, opened it and picked out a smooth, gold-plated case. He opened it, examined the cigarettes and then thrust one at Carol. He lit a match, applied the flame and then dropped the cigarette case back into the handbag. Carol's eyes narrowed slightly. This was exactly what she had hoped for.

"Thanks," she said. "I was beginning to think there wasn't a gentleman in this place. Now let's see—the *ouanga* bag. Oh, yes! I wrote a note explaining how I got it, handed it to a taxi driver and sent him to my managing editor with it. By now it is public knowledge that Mrs. Martin is involved in voodoo. Her car is outside this house and I also indicated the marker number of it so I presume every policeman in the city is on the lookout for it. You may expect a very authoritative tap on your front door at any moment."

Zuro uttered an oath and whirled around to face Riga.

"Get on the phone and call all available men here. Have them come well armed. Then get that damned car out of the way. Blow it up, run it into the river—anything, only do it fast. If the police arrive before our men do, they'll never take me out of here."

He faced Carol once more. "You are an extremely astute girl. I know you are telling the truth, but I am very sorry to say that by sending on your information you have signed a death warrant—your own. And Mrs. Martin will deny everything. She will say that she merely went straight home, that she doesn't know what happened to her car and that she merely knew you as a passerby who helped her when she fainted."

Carol blew a column of smoke toward the ceiling and crossed her legs. She displayed none of the fear that filled her heart. She had one chance of life now—to stall—to gain time so that the Bat might locate this place and swing into action.

"You evidently don't know our police," she said. "Though I have a good idea that you will soon become acquainted with them. They can make anyone talk. Mrs. Martin will break down after ten minutes of questioning."

Zuro smiled slyly and bellowed an order to Mrs. Martin. The older woman approached tremulously and kept wringing her hands. She seemed to imply Zuro's question, unless there was some kind of mental telepathy between them.

"They will never make me talk. If I do, my daughter will be sent to the electric chair. I will keep silent because of her. Nothing—no one can make me tell about Dr. Zuro. I will obey him no matter what he commands."

Carol puffed on the cigarette again and looked up at Zuro, studying his every feature.

"Well, Svengali," she said caustically, "you certainly seem to have her under your thumb. But I

still think the cops will make her talk. If her daughter killed someone, they'll know about it anyhow."

ZURO bent down, cupped Carol's chin and raised her head until she was looking straight into his eyes.

"Look at me," Zuro commanded sharply. "You cannot disobey. Look into my eyes, do you hear?"

Carol jerked his hand away.

"Sorry, Svengali, but I don't like to look at you. That face belongs in a surrealist painting, not on a man. Of course I'm in error there. You can't be a man. Well—where do we go from here?"

Zuro cursed in a low voice. Then someone hissed a signal from downstairs. Zuro called out in reply and two men came up the stairs. They were scowling, cruel looking creatures, the dregs of the underworld. Each one kept his right hand glued into his coat pocket and Carol knew the bulge there represented a gun.

"The girl in the next room is to be taken away," Zuro ordered. "One of you can do that without any trouble. The other will remain by this girl's side. When I am clear of the house, I shall signal with two blasts on the siren of my car. At that sound you will put a bullet through this girl's head and be sure she is dead. Is that perfectly clear?"

One of the thugs nodded and stepped close to Carol. He drew a gun from his pocket and thrust the muzzle of it close to her temple.

"When that horn blows, her brains will blow, too, Boss—right over against that wall, and when I blast 'em, they don't ever talk again. And say—the rest of the boys are planted outside. They got every window and door covered. If the cops come, they'll get one swell surprise."

Zuro took Mrs. Martin's arm. "As for you, I'm sorry, but you'll have to come with us. It's too dangerous to allow you to go free now. Follow my orders and you will not be harmed nor will I permit your daughter's arrest."

He bowed ironically to Carol.

"I am extremely sorry about you, too, my dear. A pretty girl intrigues me and you have but one fault Your nose is too long."

Zuro piloted Mrs. Martin out of the room and began hurrying down the stairs. Carol glanced at the killer assigned to blow her brains out. She knew the type. He had the intelligence of an ape, but he'd obey orders, and a little detail like murder wouldn't give him nightmares.

Carol shivered. In a moment or two Zuro would be in his car. The horn would blast a signal and the gun would blast her out of existence. Even if the Bat arrived, he'd find himself faced by insurmountable odds with Zuro's men waiting outside. Carol closed her eyes tightly and prayed that she wouldn't hear Zuro blowing the signal which meant the end of life.

CHAPTER V
Wings of the Bat

THE Bat left his coupé some distance from the address which Felix Martin's dying fingers had traced on the pad. He was thankful that this was a quiet section and few people were around. The address proved to be an odd looking place. more like a small church than a house. On one side was an open apace of several hundred feet. but on the other a building half a story higher was set fairly close. The Bat reached this adjoining building and began prowling the night, moving slowly toward his destination. He wasted little time, for he sensed that Carol was very probably in a desperate position.

Suddenly the Bat ducked into deep shadows. His super-acute hearing warned him that several men were approaching. Through the darkness he could see them plainly, even distinguish their features. He frowned. What did hoodlums like these have to do with voodoo and its black practices? The men seemed to be taking up positions planned beforehand. One crouched behind a small bush, drew a gun and kept his eyes on the house. The Bat smiled tightly beneath his mask and crept forward without making a sound. He stepped over a pile of cinders beside the driveway, for while ordinary eyes would never have seen them, they were plainly visible to the Bat.

He suddenly hurled himself forward. One hand clapped across the thug's mouth, the other landed on his wrist and twisted it with a sharp, expert movement that sent the gun flying into the bush. For a brief instant the thug had a look at his attacker and his eyes went wide in terror. The ribbed cape was outflung, the hooded head looked weirdly like that of a bat. There was no question as to the identity of this being who could stalk through the darkness and pounce like a hungry mountain lion. Then a fist crashed against the thug's jaw and he went limp.

The Bat quickly pasted a small sticker to the man's forehead. It was the silhouette of a bat, wings outspread, talons hooked. This was the widely feared sign of the Black Bat.

Then he retreated quickly until he was standing beside the rear door of the building that adjoined Zuro's place. The building had been empty for a long time. The lock on the rear door was badly rusted. The Bat put his shoulder against the flimsy panels and pushed. Wood cracked and the lock gave way. He paused, listening to see if the sound had aroused any of the other members of the gang. He heard a softly called warning and then someone moved

quickly in his direction. The Bat raced through the house, avoiding any pitfalls that might have sent a person with ordinary eyesight sprawling several times.

HE reached the top floor, glanced out of the window and saw three men clustered around the thug he had knocked out. Then he located the way to the roof, swarmed up the ladder and raised the trapdoor. Now he could hear the trio below, talking in hoarse whispers.

"If the Black Bat is sticking his nose into this, I'm gettin' out," one of the men vowed.

"Yeah—in a morgue wagon," another retorted. "Maybe the Bat is a tough guy, but Zuro ain't no daisy. Besides, there's going to be plenty of dough pretty soon, and me—I'm thinking Zuro can handle the Bat okay. He ain't any different than us. You guys are scared of him because he's got a reputation. So now we spread out and look for him. Shoot to kill, understand?"

The Bat gauged the distance to the roof of the house next door. It was a broad, dangerous jump. Besides clearing the distance between the two buildings, he also had half a story to drop to the neighboring roof. A door slammed and the Bat glanced down once more. He saw a man of tremendous proportions hurry out of the house, dragging a woman after him. The manner in which the hoodlums on guard stepped away indicated that this big-shouldered individual was probably this man they called Zuro.

Then the Bat received a shock. Another man came out of the house and he held a girl in his arms, carrying her toward the garage where a car motor already was roaring into life. The girl lay limply in the man's arms, but her head was covered.

"Carol!" The Bat said hoarsely. "If they harm her, I'll tear them apart."

To make his way back to the ground in time to thwart a getaway was impossible. The trail which led the Bat to this house hadn't ended yet. Now he had to learn the destination of Zuro's next stopping place. The fact that Carol was still alive gave him some measure of confidence. Apparently her life was valuable to Zuro.

The Bat stepped back a dozen paces, took a long breath and began running. He leaped off the edge of the building and the wind caught his cape, billowing it out like the gigantic wings of some huge bird. Across the ground below it threw a grotesque shadow that brought yells of alarm from the crooks gathered there.

"The Bat!" someone cried. "He can fly!"

The Bat landed lightly on the roof, was up in a flash and streaking across the rooftop, looking for some means of entering the house. To his consternation he saw that there was no skylight or even a trap door. His heart dropped, but he didn't stop to worry about this new turn of affairs. Instead he leaned over the east side of the building and saw that a window was only a matter of two feet below him and it had a wide, sturdy looking sill.

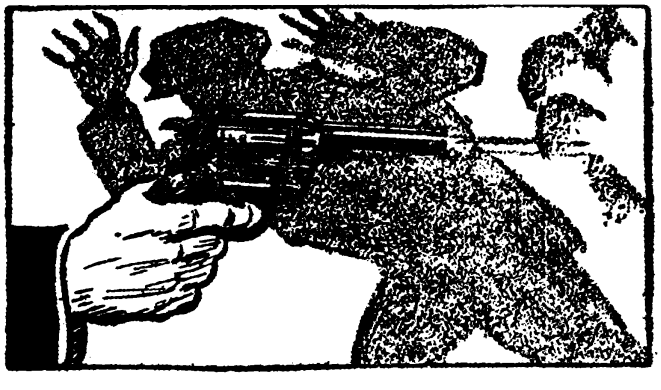
HIS black outfit concealed any movements he had to make from the men below and the Bat had an idea that those crooks were leaving in a vast hurry. He dropped over the edge, clinging to it with his hands. His feet secured a hold on the window sill and he was able to lower himself enough to see that the window was opaque. He held on with one hand, drew his gun with the other and smashed the upper window pane to secure admittance. The blow he wielded was a hard one and it shattered almost the entire window pane. Light streamed out. A gun barked and the bullet howled past his head. Somewhere below a car horn blasted twice.

The Bat quickly oriented himself despite the difficult position he found himself in. Clinging to the roof with one hand, holding his gun with the other and trying to retain a precarious balance with his feet made his movements slow. Then he saw inside that room and forgot all about himself. Carol was seated in a chair and a monkey-faced crook was standing beside her with a gun in his hand. The killer was torn between a desire to send this intruder hurtling to the ground with a bullet in his middle or carry out the orders of Zuro. That fraction of a second's indecision was tantamount to suicide. The Bat's gun blazed twice. The killer clawed at his chest, gaped stupidly at blood that seeped through his fingers and then collapsed without a sound.

The Bat swung into the room. Carol got up, ran over to him and he held her closely for a moment. She shivered once and then obtained a firmer grip on her nerves.

"He—he was ordered to—to shoot me. The signal was the blast of a car horn and—and it came just as you broke the window. Another second and it would have been too late."

"But I wasn't too late," the Bat comforted her. "Carol—you shouldn't have done this. It's too dangerous trying to tackle a mob all alone."



She looked up at him and forced a smile. "But why don't you ask me what I discovered? I really didn't do so badly."

The Bat held her at arm's length and beneath his mask a slow smile spread across his face and his eyes were filled with admiration for her courage.

"Well—what did you find?"

She began checking things on the fingers of her left hand.

"First there's a dead man downstairs. Then there's a girl who I think was hypnotized. She thought she was killing me with a knife, but there was no knife in her hand. Then there's Mrs. Martin, The girl, by the way, is Mrs. Martin's daughter, Lydia. Then there is Dr. Zuro, a practitioner of voodoo and the head of the foulest organization of crime I've ever heard of. He even tried to hypnotize me, only I wouldn't let him, and there wasn't time enough so he could force me to keep looking at him. How's that for a beginner in the detective business, Mr. Black Bat?"

"Let's go downstairs and see the dead man," the Bat said. "The rest of it can come later. And Carol—of course I know you've done what probably no other girl could accomplish. Just the same you've got to stop running into danger like this."

THEY hurried down the steps with the Bat in the lead, two guns ready for action, but there was no interference. When Zuro had made good his getaway, the mob had dispersed without delay. The image of that huge bat, whisking across the ground had been almost too much for them.

Carol indicated the room where she had seen the dead man. The Bat went in cautiously, signaling for Carol to stay outside. He stepped over to the chess table and grimly raised the dead man's head. Then he proceeded to search him until he discovered a wallet. Inside this were identification papers.

"An F.B.I. agent?" The Bat whistled his amazement. "This thing is assuming tremendous proportions."

He began a search of the room, but found nothing of any particular interest. He noted that the dead man's hand was pinioned to the chessboard by another knife and wondered about this. Then his keen eyes roved across the floor. He bent down and picked up a chessman, fashioned after a skull. He rotated this slowly between his gloved fingers, trying to puzzle out its significance. He noticed that it was covered with blood.

"What is it?" Carol asked over his shoulder.

The Bat put an arm around her shoulder and turned her away from the corpse.

"I don't know," he answered slowly. "I have an idea that this dead man may have possibly knocked it off this chessboard. If he did, there was a particular reason. It's a clue of some kind, but its meaning isn't clear to me yet. If we only had a lead on this Dr. Zuro."

Carol said, "Ah-h-h—but we have. That's my biggest surprise. I tricked him into taking my cigarette case out of my purse. He wasn't wearing gloves and there should be a beautiful set of his fingerprints on the case."

"You," the Bat said, "are as clever as you are pretty. But I've got to look over that altar in the corner. Stay close by me, darling."

They moved over to the altar and the Bat examined the various objects placed upon it.

"Voodoo without the slightest doubt," he said quietly. "With all the trimmings, too. And what's this?"

He picked up a small leather pouch, the replica of the one Carol had taken from Mrs. Martin. He opened it and poured the contents upon the altar. The usual motley array of weird objects rolled out, but the Bat only became interested in one. There was another of those expertly carved beads, fashioned out of a block of lead. In the eerie bluish light the tiny features leered up at them. There was a minutely carved knife sticking out of the image's throat.

"Victor Hoffman!" the Bat gasped.

"The financier?" Carol asked. "What does it mean? There was one of those same heads in the *ouanga* bag Mrs. Martin got."

The Bat nodded grimly. "It was the death *ouanga* made against her husband. He died—just before I got here. I saw him die, Carol, and there wasn't a soul near him except me. He was ready to talk, but the death *ouanga* got him first. Let's get out of here—quickly."

CHAPTER VI
Again—Silent Death

AN HOUR later Tony Quinn sat in his living room. The Black Bat had vanished temporarily and Tony Quinn was dressed in comfortable, baggy tweeds and a smoking jacket. His eyes were blank and blind. His scarred face showed none of the excitement that raged within him. Carol sat opposite while Silk stood guard at the door. All curtains were tightly drawn.

"What bothers me most," Tony Quinn said, "is the fact that there happens to be a tie-up between this voodoo rage that is sweeping the city and elements that belong to organized crime. This Dr. Zuro is apparently a disciple of voodoo, possibly a *papaloi*, or priest. But if so, why does he consort with crooks and why are they afraid of him? Why

did he take Mrs. Martin a prisoner and her daughter —hypnotized, you say. It sounds incredible."

"It is incredible," Carol agreed. "Furthermore Zuro holds Mrs. Martin in the palm of his hand because he threatens to send Lydia Martin to the electric chair unless all his demands are accepted. Tony—do you think she—could have murdered that man we found downstairs?"

Quinn pondered the idea for a moment.

"It's possible, but Felix Martin told me that Lydia was acting as a secret agent trying to get the goods on this Dr. Zuro. He also told me that she was in love with a G-Man working on the same ease. The connection is too amazing to be coincidental. The dead federal agent was undoubtedly the man she loved and—women don't murder their sweethearts."

"But she was hypnotized," Carol insisted. "She couldn't have known what she was doing."

Tony Quinn wagged his head from side to side.

"Which is only an argument against it, darling. You see, a clever hypnotist can rob his victim of his senses, make him act foolish perhaps, and obey simple commands, but no hypnotist alive can make a person do something utterly repugnant to them. This girl, no matter how well hypnotized, would not find it possible to kill a man she was in love with."

Carol laid a hand over Tony Quinn's arm.

"Then Tony, it—it must be voodoo. We don't understand it thoroughly. Perhaps there is something like—like those zombies, for instance. Those walking dead persons. Tony—that may be it. Lydia looked like a dead girl. She looked as though she belonged in a casket and a tomb, not moving about like a living person."

"Maybe," Quinn said slowly. "But zombies also have their limitations. No one understands definitely whether they are living dead people or only persons who lapse into a lethargy similar to death from which they are awakened by drugs. That they possess no mind of their own is a proven fact, but beyond that we know nothing. I don't believe in ghosts, Carol. Therefore I don't believe in zombies, nor in *ouangas*. Yet I saw Felix Martin die—as horribly as any man could die. He couldn't utter a sound and he was beyond help half a minute after the attack hit him. We're in this too deep to pull out now, even if we wanted to. I'm going to see this Victor Hoffman. With a death *ouanga* made against him he seems to be next on the list. If I can find out why—I may have a lead to work on."

CAROL got up quickly. "I'm ready, Tony."

Quinn chuckled and put both hands on her shoulders.

"You'll stay right here, Carol. My heart did a somersault when I saw you in that house. I want to know you'll be safe. If anyone comes, duck into the lab. I'll be back before daylight."

Carol made no protest. Tony Quinn had a way of issuing orders which brooked no denial. She helped him on with the regalia of the Bat, watched him vanish into the tunnel and then went back into the house where Silk awaited her.

Quinn drove the coupé along deserted streets. He drove by Hoffman's spacious residence and saw that it was in total darkness. He glanced at his watch. It was well after one a.m.

Five minutes later anyone lurking in the gloom behind Hoffman's home would have been startled to see a huge, bird-like creature swarm up the pillars of the rear porch, secure a grip on the edge of a small roof and pull himself up and over. Then the figure crawled as silently as a ghost toward a window that was open about six or eight inches.

The Bat looked into a bedroom. Someone groaned and seemed to be tossing about sleeplessly. The Bat pushed up the window very slowly and quietly. He climbed into the room, gun in hand, and moved over toward the bed. Suddenly the lights were flashed on and a wild-eyed man of about fifty sat erect and tried to fumble for a gun under his pillow.

"I wouldn't," the Bat said mildly. "I don't mean you any harm, Mr. Hoffman. I'm the Black Bat."

"The Bat!" Hoffman leaned back weakly against his rumpled pillow. "Wh-what do you want with me?"

"Information," the Bat replied. "A short time ago Felix Martin died— mysteriously. There was a death *ouanga* made against him. There is one made against you, too, Mr. Hoffman. I thought you ought to know about it."

"A—death *ouanga*—against me?" Hoffman sat erect again. "I—I don't see why. I haven't done anything to offend—"

"Offend whom?" the Bat asked sharply.

Hoffman grimaced. "I—I don't know what I'm saying. I wish you'd get out of here. There is enough trouble for me without looking at you with that mask—that cape and a gun sticking under my nose. I tell you I can't stand much more. I'm a sick man."

"You'll be a dead man," the Bat reminded him, "unless you talk. Look here, Mr. Hoffman, a man known as Dr. Zuro has some hold over you or over someone close to you. By telling me all you know, I might be able to run down this Zuro and expose him for the fraud he must be."

HOFFMAN bowed his head and seemed to be thinking. When he looked up again, there was a harrowed expression on his face.

"You're nothing but a crook and killer yourself," he argued. "Why should I tell you? But—but

maybe I should. I—I can't go to the police and I've got to tell someone. You won't go to the police either, and I'm safe there and I have heard you keep your word. Very well—I murdered a man. I killed him in cold blood. Dr. Zuro knows I did it and he can prove it. That's why I—I've been paying him every nickel I could scrape together. That's why I'm almost ready for a bankruptcy court right now. He's bled me white, Bat. He's forced me to sell my holdings to pay over everything I could get to him. Now you have it. What are you going to do about it?"

"Just whom did you kill?" the Bat asked in a soothing voice. "Don't be afraid to continue. I'm going to do nothing about it except run down Zuro. Anyway, he's finished with you—got all he could bleed out of you. That's why the death *ouanga* was made. You're the next man on his list, Hoffman. Perhaps by telling me everything, I can save your life."

Hoffman stared moodily at the Bat and then cleared his throat. He started to talk, but the telephone at his bedside buzzed. He seized it and barked an answer. Then he turned deathly pale and the fingers that gripped the instrument held it so tightly that the knuckles gleamed white. He hung up, mopped his forehead and sighed.

"I'm as good as dead now," he groaned. "Someone told me that if I talked, I'd die, and I'd find out how it felt to be unable to even call for help as I died. I—I don't know what he meant by that, but I've talked already so I might as well tell the rest of it. The man I killed was Gareth Hazelton—my business partner. They—they found him stabbed to death in an old house about a month ago.

"I—I did it! I don't know why. I liked him—we'd been friends for years. But this—this Zuro made me do it. I'm sure he did. All I remember is that Zuro was looking into my eyes and then things went blank until I—I woke up and found myself standing beside Gareth with a bloody knife in my hand and him dead—stabbed through the throat.

"I dropped the knife and fled. But I couldn't get away from Zuro. He came here—demanded money, and I gave it to him. I couldn't help myself, could I? Any man would have done the same thing. At first it was only twenty thousand and then it grew and grew until I was wiped out. Now you have it. I'm a murderer and a victim of blackmail. I killed my best friend and I don't know why. Maybe I'm mad. I—I sometimes feel that I—I—"

His voice grew low and then stopped entirely. He raised both hands, clawing at his throat. The Bat sprang to his aide. Hoffman's mouth worked spasmodically. An unholy terror shone in his eyes. He seemed to be trying to talk with them. Not the faintest sound came from his throat. His face grew redder and redder until the Bat thought a blood vessel would burst. Then Hoffman sank back against the pillows and went limp.

THE BAT ripped open his pajamas, pressed an ear against his chest and heard a definite heartbeat. He could do nothing for this man. Whatever devil's curse afflicted his throat was beyond anything that the Bat might ease. Hoffman needed help and a doctor. Perhaps with speedy action he might be saved.

The Bat raced for the door. There would be servants, if he could arouse them. He must, even if it meant risking his own neck to do so. He flung open the bedroom door. The powerful beam of a flashlight struck him full in the face. For a second he was blinded by the light, but then those amazing eyes of his penetrated beyond the light and he saw two gaping thugs with guns sagging limply, gazing at him in startled awe.

Before they could swing into action, the Bat ducked and then lunged forward. He caught one man around the middle, lifted him completely off the floor and hurled him at his companion. They both went down with a crash. The flashlight blinked out. A gun blazed through the darkness and the bullet smashed into the wall behind the Bat. There were more of the thugs downstairs. The Bat's two guns went into action, sweeping the stairway with their fire. He heard someone cry out in pain and the sound of a body dropping heavily attested to his marksmanship. Again a bullet whined by his ear. He flung himself flat on the floor and pumped four more slugs into the reception hall below.

Someone snapped on the lights. The Bat didn't even blink, but the three thugs in the hallway below were temporarily blinded as darkness gave way to brilliant light. The Bat's guns covered the trio.

"Lift 'em," he barked. "All of you are covered."

They dropped their guns from the moment their eyes could see, for they noticed the pair of automatics thrust over the floor above and threatening them.

"Turn around!" the Bat ordered crisply. "Walk over to the wall and face it. One false move will be your last one and if you have any doubts about my marksmanship, I'll tell you that I'm—the Black Bat."

He heard three wheezing gasps of surprise and fear from the men below. The Bat got up warily, keeping his eyes on the men and at the same time taking swift glances toward the two thugs he had knocked out. He walked over to them, kicked their guns out of reach and then headed for the staircase.

He had no warning of what happened. There was just a banging against the back of his head and things began to spin. He teetered on the edge of a step, swaying like a drunken man and fighting

The Bat threw two well-aimed shots at the thug.

against the wave of weakness that swept up over him. He was dimly aware of a huge metal vase rolling down the steps and then it seemed as though he was following it. The lighted hallway became a kaleidoscope of rapidly turning ceilings and stairs. He hit the landing, rolled twice and saw the three thugs converging upon him, lips drawn back in snarls of triumph. He still held onto his guns.

THE realization that he must do something quickly brought him out of his partial stupor. One gun moved to the left and blazed twice. The light switch near the front door seemed to jump into the air and then the house was plunged into darkness as the bullet ripped through wires and insulation.

The Bat rolled over several times. The three thugs, bent on swift murder, fumbled around for him. They were blind now while the Bat could see perfectly. He took a quick look up the staircase and for a brief instant he caught a glimpse of a man with tremendous shoulders, moving fast along the corridor. The Bat couldn't see his face, but the man's build was exceptional enough to make identification easy. Dr. Zuro was in the house. That meant Hoffman was doomed, if he was not already dead.

The Bat lifted his guns and fired two shots over the heads of the cursing thugs. That was sufficient. Their none too fertile minds already possessed an idea that the Bat was no ordinary human being. They had seen him struck on the head by a huge vase, sent rolling down a staircase, and then he had recovered almost instantly to douse the lights with some amazingly accurate shooting. The three men wheeled as one and raced for the door. They were perfect targets for the Bat's gun, but he had more important prey and the Bat shot no one in the back.

He climbed to his feet, shook his head violently to dispel the cobwebs that were forming and then he began running up the stairs. He made a straight line for Hoffman's bedroom. Someone down the hall, a man's voice, was shouting over the phone, yelling for help and the police. The Bat paid no attention to this. He darted into Hoffman's room. The bed was empty and the window looking out on the rear porch roof was wide open.

The Bat rushed over to it, climbed through and slid down to the porch. He landed on the ground. saw a man's form lying almost at his feet and quickly turned the man over. It was Hoffman. He was still breathing. His eyes were open and staring in near madness. He seemed to be trying to talk,

but no sound came from his throat. Then a siren howled somewhere. The Bat knelt beside Hoffman.

"Help is coming! The police will get you a doctor. Your best bet is to hide out temporarily, but I'll need to contact you later. If you're able, insert an ad in the *Times-Star*. Give your address and sign it 'Desperate.' Don't worry about the murder Zuro saddled on your shoulders. I don't believe you killed Hazelton and I'll try to prove it."

Hoffman couldn't answer, but the mad light left his eyes for a moment, as though he understood and felt relieved. Then the Bat was gone.

CHAPTER VII
The Laugh on McGrath

LIEUTENANT McGRATH, short, stocky and bald headed, was the first man to reach Hoffman's side. McGrath's gun was in his hand and he looked intently into the darkness.

"Funny," he growled to himself, "I could have sworn something faded away like a ghost or—the Black Bat. But what would he be doing here?"

Other policemen hurried up. McGrath had Hoffman carried into the house and called a doctor. He paced the living room floor impatiently while the physician made a quick examination.

"I don't know what's wrong with him," he told McGrath. "There's a strange paralysis of the throat muscles. His heart is beating rapidly and he's had a severe shock. That may be the answer—a shock. I've got to get him to a hospital—quickly."

McGrath nodded and questioned a white-haired servant who clasped a bathrobe tightly around his spare figure.

"There was shooting and a lot of noise," he said. "There's blood all over the rug as you have seen, and a lot of holes in the walls. It must have been burglars, although they wouldn't get much here. Not with the master selling everything of value that he owned."

"Didn't you see anything at all?" McGrath barked.

The servant looped puzzled for a moment.

"Well, yes, I did, but it sounds so absurd that I—I didn't feel like telling you about it. After I phoned, I hurried into the upper hallway and looked into the master's room. I—I saw something that looked like a great bird actually plunging out of the window. It must have been my imagination—"

"Imagination, my eye," McGrath grated, "That was the Black Bat you saw. For once my hunch was right."

McGrath gave rapid orders to his men and then ran out to the street and piled into his car. There was one thought in his mind. If the Bat was prowling around here, then he couldn't be in two places at the same time. McGrath possessed a strong idea that Tony Quinn, blind ex-District Attorney, was the Bat. Therefore, if he could reach Quinn's home before he returned—well, explanations would be in order.

Every other time that McGrath had tried this trick, he'd failed miserably, but every other time the Bat knew he was after him. Now the Bat might take his time or even pay some other place a visit, for how could he be aware that Detective-Lieutenant McGrath was rolling at top speed toward Quinn's house?

McGrath shut off his siren as he neared the vicinity of Quinn's estate. He slowed up and smiled contentedly. If he could only find Quinn missing, that would be something to lead to the finish of the Bat.

Then McGrath's foot suddenly jumped from the gas pedal to the brake and he stiffened. There was a cold muzzle of a gun pressed against the back of his head.

"GOOD evening, Lieutenant," a laughing voice greeted him. "This is a perfect spot to pull over and have that little chat I promised you not many hours ago. Just ease her over to the curb. I don't want to blow your head off, you know. Life without you would be like eating fish without lemon—absolutely unsavory, my dear Lieutenant."

McGrath growled an oath, but he obeyed. When the car stopped beneath a huge tree that shadowed it well, McGrath turned his head and saw the starkly clear outlines of the Black Bat's hooded head.

"Most fortunate that you actually picked me up," the Bat chuckled. "I was wondering how I could contact you without raising your blood pressure too high. How was Hoffman when you found him?"

"A stroke of some kind," McGrath answered tartly. "What were you doing in his house? No wonder the poor guy almost passed out. Listen, Bat, if he dies, it's another rap hanging over that head of yours."

"Not mine," the Bat laughed. "An *ouanga* bag is responsible for Hoffman's inability to speak. That's a voodoo word, in case you don't know. Now, Lieutenant—your word that you won't try any funny tricks and I'll stow this gun away. My hand is getting awfully tired holding the thing up. We're neck-deep in something that may be even too big for both of us. Are you willing to work with me?"

"No," McGrath roared. "I wouldn't work with you if it meant an inspector's badge for me. But I'll agree to a truce because I want to find out what you know. Too damned many funny things have been

happening around here lately. We're all stumped at headquarters and—well—I—"

"You think perhaps my mighty brain may be able to solve your problems," the Bat put in amiably. "Quite right, Lieutenant. Now, about Felix Martin. Did your medical examiner find out what killed him?"

"Sure—heart trouble. He just ticked out, that's all. There was a swelling around his throat, but no marks on it, so the M.E. just passed that over."

The Bat sighed as he stowed his gun away.

"I was afraid of that. Martin was killed just as he was in the midst of telling me something important. Hoffman, likewise, had news of vital interest to me. He received a phone call that warned him not to talk or he'd find himself speechless. He defied the threat and—like Martin—his speaking apparatus froze up on him. Whatever is responsible must have some action on the heart as well, but Hoffman was strong enough to withstand it and Martin wasn't. Now, Lieutenant, you know what I know except for one thing: you'll find a murdered G-Man in a voodoo temple at 117 Reid Avenue. There's a knife through his back. Check it for prints and I'll bet ten to one you'll find they're the prints of a woman. No matter what you think, she isn't guilty, so I won't tell you her name."

McGRATH laughed harshly.

"Chivalrous, aren't you? All right, Bat. You've gotten away with plenty. Maybe you have helped me, but there's some reason in your larcenous heart why you did it. One of these days I'll land you right, rip that mask off your face and charge you with every damned law violation on the books. But I agreed to exchange news, so here it is: this voodoo business is driving us crazy. There have been plenty of squawks, but we can't take any action. It's a down-to-earth blackmail scheme, but you need evidence and testimony to convict blackmailers. We don't even know who their victims are. We're not even sure it's going on. Oh, damn it, we're not sure of anything."

"Relax, Lieutenant," the Bat said. "You're actually sweating in excitement."

McGrath sighed and reached for the silk handkerchief nestling in his breast pocket. He whipped it out and something white fell from it, landing in the tonneau at the Bat's feet. He picked it up and almost gave away his surprise with an ejaculation of dismay. The object that had fallen from McGrath's pocket was a chessman—fashioned like a skull.

"Morbid sort of person, carrying around a luck charm like that." The Bat handed it back to McGrath.

"Luck charm, my hat," McGrath answered grimly. "Eight hoods stuck up a jewelry store late this afternoon. One of the traffic cops let go with all six slugs in his service pistol and he brought down one bird. Then a rapid-fire rifle mowed him down. We got the dead man all right and he had one of those automatic rifles, too—oh, damn it—why does everything have to happen all at once? For the last three months there have been more robberies than we've ever known before and none of 'em have been solved. Not one stolen gem has ever been recovered and plenty of cops have died trying to stop the bandits. It's not only in this city. It's nationwide!"

"Who was the dead crook?" the Bat asked.

McGrath snorted as he thought of the dead thing.

"A mug known as Philadelphia Jake—just a cheap gutter rat doped up for the occasion. But it was the rifle he had that gave us the jitters. A regulation Sharps Arms Company gun, but—there wasn't a single number on it. They haven't been burned off, either. They just never were stamped on the gun. It's got me down. It's got all of us in the dumps. Me—I haven't had any sleep for thirty-six hours. I'm dead on my feet and you sit there. I can't even see you in the darkness. Someday, Bat, when I'm not so busy, I'll ferret you out I'll prove who you are and then you won't be laughing at me from behind that mask. I'll—hey—what the devil!"

McGRATH fanned the darkness of the rear seat with his hand. The Bat was gone. Instantly McGrath whirled around, started the car and sent it rocketing toward Tony Quinn's home. He stopped with a squeal of brakes, jumped out and saw that there were lights on in the living room. He raced up the path, pressed the doorbell and then banged on the door for good measure. There was a triumphant grin on his face. This time he had him. It wasn't possible for the Bat to have reached Tony Quinn's house and—if he was Tony Quinn, McGrath was there ahead of him this time.

Then McGrath's jaw sagged. The door opened and blind Tony Quinn looked slightly to the left of him. He was dressed in his usual tweeds, unpressed and untidy, his hair looked as if it needed combing.

"Yes?" Quinn asked. "Who is it? I'm blind. I can't see you."

"It—it's me," McGrath said lamely. "I—I was just passing by and thought I'd drop in. Just to be sure you had no hard feelings, Mr. Quinn. You can't blame a man for having suspicions."

Tony Quinn's face spread into a broad smile.

"The Black Bat again, eh? Sorry, Lieutenant, I haven't tested my wings this evening. In fact, I've been sitting very quietly in my living room enjoying the warmth from my fireplace. If you'll come in, I'll have Silk get you a drink."

"No—no thanks," McGrath started down the steps. "I need one—I need about ten—but I'm on duty. Maybe I'll drop in some other time and take you up on it. Thanks anyway, for not being sore."

McGrath marched back to his car, thrust his hat to the back of his head and swore lustily.

Tony Quinn closed the door, walked over to a big chair and collapsed. He was panting heavily when Silk emerged from behind a curtain.

"Silk," he announced, "I enjoy teasing McGrath. He lends spice to the chase, but if you ever try to talk to a man and at the same time keep yourself from gasping for wind, don't do it. Give yourself up. I thought my lungs would burst. It's lucky I had only two yards to cross before I came to the garden house. I had a two or three minute leeway before McGrath missed me."

"But you fooled him, sir," Silk said. "You fooled him completely. The way you tore through the house, I thought a million voodoo priests were on your tail and it was only McGrath. What a laugh!"

"Yes," Quinn panted. "What—a—laugh!"

CHAPTER VIII
Plan for Action

BEFORE dawn there was an important meeting in Tony Quinn's home. One that McGrath would have cheerfully given his right eye to witness. In the hidden laboratory, Tony Quinn studied the gold-plated cigarette case which Carol had tricked Dr. Zuro into handling.

"You'll find one of the nicest set of prints you ever saw," she said happily. "Zuro didn't wear gloves and he took a firm grip on the case. I protected it by padding my gloves against it so all you have to do, Tony, is develop the prints and find the man they match. That shouldn't be hard when you line up a group of suspects."

"What makes you think this Dr. Zuro isn't just what he seems to be—Dr. Zuro?" Quinn asked as he dusted the cigarette case with a fine gray powder. "Why should he be someone else?"

Carol wrinkled her forehead at that one.

"I—don't know, Tony. Perhaps it's only a hunch, but he—well, he just doesn't look human, that's all. He's wide enough to be two men and he is always careful to keep wrapped up in a robe. And that face—nobody could possess one like that and not be someone extraordinary."

Quinn nodded. "I think you're right, Carol. I have had only a glimpse of the man, but he does look unnatural. We'll see about that."

Quinn picked up a magnifying glass and studied both sides of the cigarette case. Finally he laid both objects down and regarded Carol with a quizzical expression.

"You understand, darling," he said, "that I'm not doubting your word. If you say Zuro didn't wear gloves, then he didn't. If you say he handled this cigarette case, he did, but—outside of your own, there isn't a fingerprint on the surface of it and that case is polished just nicely enough to take a print from the lightest touch on it. Either Zuro has no fingerprints or he's ethereal—like a ghost."

Carol clenched both fists. "Then he tricked me somehow. I wondered how I put that over on him so easily. Tony—he's clever if he can do a thing like that. Devilishly clever."

Quinn rumpled his hair and sighed.

"That's evident enough. What I want to know is how Zuro, a master of voodoo, has become connected with punks and mugs from the seepage of the underworld. And why! On the surface it seems that he frames people into committing certain misdeeds, or digs up something ripe out of their past and then resorts to the old-fashioned blackmail system. There's money in that angle of course, but somehow I think Zuro is after bigger things. Have you been keeping up on the newspaper clippings, Carol?"

She nodded. "I brought them all over earlier tonight. Tony—one significant thing stands out. I told you about part of it before. Crime clippings have increased and the surplus deals entirely with a number of holdups and murders. It's always gold or jewelry that is stolen, and usually with some rather careless shooting. So far nineteen people have lost their lives at the guns of the bandits. They simply can't be the same gang because the robberies take place all over the country and the time element makes it impossible for the same outfit to be pulling all the jobs."

QUINN lit a cigarette and stared at the smoke which curled toward the ceiling.

"Lieutenant McGrath was telling about the same thing—the local angle, that is. Now so many crimes, all happening at the same time and all about the same type, cannot be coincidental There must be some controlling brain behind them; some Napoleon of crime who plans his misdeeds and lets hirelings attend to the details. Such a man would prove highly dangerous if he got away with it and

became even more ambitious. Oddly enough the crimes began shortly after voodoo became one of the newer fads in town. And one of the crooks, according to McGrath, was found with a chessman shaped like a skull, just like the one I found on the G-Man. I'm going to find out if there is any connection. It will be morning soon. All of us must get rest and then follow orders."

"Lemme get in on it, Chief." Butch O'Leary moved his ponderous frame closer to Quinn. "I wanta lay my hooks on the mugs who grabbed Carol."

Carol looked up at Butch and smiled warmly.

"If you happen to get within range of Zuro, break his nose for me, will you, Butch? I'd do it myself if I found the chance. The colossal nerve of the man—trying to hypnotize me. Trying to make me a simple-minded, obedient slave like he made of Lydia Martin. I—I'll *blitzkrieg* that man if I meet him again."

"Yeah?" Butch asked interestedly. "What's this stuff blizt—blitz—?"

"It's German for lightning war," Carol laughed out loud. "It means you grab him quickly and don't give him a chance to get in the first blow."

Butch hunched his massive shoulders.

"Yeah, yeah. That ain't such a bad idea. Bust him first. Sure, I'll do that if I get a chance. Boy, will he be blitz—blitz—aw, I ain't so good with them fancy foreign names. I'll just sock the guy on the mush a couple of times."

"You'll keep your punches to yourself for the time being," Quinn warned. "Your job, Butch, is to cover the public meeting place of the voodoo fans. It's not secret. Just watch who goes in and out. Keep your eyes peeled for mugs. We've told you what this Dr. Zuro looks like. If he shows up, all rules are off. Nab him!"

Butch nodded and moved into the background. Silk stepped closer for instructions.

"Silk," Quinn said, "in the old lush days when you were getting easy money out of suckers with more larceny than sense in their heads, you adopted a couple of clever disguises. Put one of these on and look up a man named Victor Hoffman. He's a wealthy capitalist—or was, anyway. Find out where the ambulance took him. Then check on the murder of a man named Gareth Hazelton. Learn the exact time of his death and the place."

Silk bobbed his head up and down. "In other words, sir, I'm to either make an alibi for this Hoffman, or pin him down as a possible murderer."

"Right. You see, Hoffman has been paying tribute to someone until he's nearly broke. Last night an attempt was made on his life. He told me he had killed Gareth Hazelton and that the blackmailers were holding this over his head."

BUTCH and Silk left promptly, Silk to his own room in the house, Butch through the secret tunnel, out of the garden house and to a room he rented only a short distance from Tony Quinn's home. When they were gone, Carol and Quinn sat side by side at the laboratory bench, running through countless newspaper clippings. Quinn sorted out several before he leaned back, deep in thought.

"A man named John Chester was stabbed to death a month ago. No motive for his murder was found. Two days later the police picked up the corpse of Steve Ambrus, also killed with a knife. Now Ambrus and Chester were influential men, along the same financial and social standards as this Gareth Hazelton whom Hoffman says he murdered.

"There's a connection, Carol. Just how or why I don't know yet. Hoffman admitted that Hazelton was his business partner and close friend. We also know that Steve Ambrus was murdered in a manner similar to Hazelton. Ambrus' business partner was William Medlin. Then there's the killing of John Chester, still unsolved by the police. His business partner was a man named Charles Bromley. If Hoffman admits believing he killed his partner, then why can't we regard the partners of these other two men with suspicion? It looks to me like a clever, airtight frame-up to get these men where someone like Zuro wants them. Voodoo may lie behind it, but there is something else too, something even greater than voodoo and all its black practices."

"But how can we prove this?" Carol asked.

Quinn laid a finger alongside his nose and smiled wisely at her.

"Hoffman has paid tribute until he's broke. Bromley and Medlin will have done the same thing if implicated. Check on those men; find out where they bank. Phone the bank and ask if their accounts are in order—say they are giving your employer a good-sized check and he wants to know if it's all right. You'll learn whether or not your suspects have been overdrawn lately or if their accounts are flat right now."

"But that's tame," Carol protested. "It will take me all day to handle it."

Quinn held her closely, tilting her blond head back so he looked squarely into her eyes.

"That's exactly why I'm giving you that job, darling. I didn't enjoy seeing that gunman standing there, ready to put a bullet through your pretty head. It nearly drove me frantic trying to discover where you were. I was lucky to do so, because if Felix Martin hadn't possessed some exceptional stamina he'd never have been able to give me that address before he died. Now run along. Let me know what you've found tomorrow. Come in person—too dangerous to phone. One of these days

McGrath is going to get too ambitious and try tapping my wire. We can't take chances."

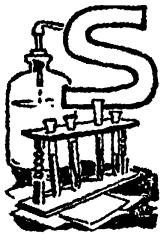
Carol leaned down and kissed him swiftly. Then she fled down through the trapdoor and along the tunnel. For several minutes, Tony Quinn sat staring into space, almost as avidly as when he pretended to be stone blind.

IT came to him then that the sacrifice he was making to fight crime was growing larger day by day. But he also knew that skillfully inserted in his own eyes were parts of the eyes of Carol's dead father—a man who had been murdered by gangster bullets. His gift of sight had been made with one purpose in mind—to enable Tony Quinn to see once more and devote himself to an endless fight against those who flaunted the law.

He shook himself back to a more normal state, picked up his cane and instantly the mask of blindness swept over his eyes. He stepped out of the laboratory and into his own spacious study. The shades were drawn, but Silk heard him stirring about and came in. He raised the shades and if any inquisitive eyes had been watching, they would have seen a totally blind man making his tortuous way across a room crowded with furniture, to finally drop into a chair in front of a big fireplace. The flames reflected dully in his sightless eyes and Tony Quinn never moved them away. Cane between his knees, hands cupped over the handle of it, he looked forlorn and beaten—as though he no longer had a mission in life.

Ten minutes later he was asleep and Silk quietly put out the lights.

CHAPTER IX
The Bat Revealed



SHORTLY after eight o'clock the next evening, Butch O'Leary surveyed the public meeting place of the voodoo cult. They operated openly, even advertised, but they were careful to perform none of their blood rites here. A swarthy man who called himself a *papaloi* and really did come from Haiti, led the meeting.

Here wealthy men and women assembled to listen to the works of voodoo eulogized. Police secretly attended many of the meetings, and found no violations of the law. After the meetings, private interviews were held with those who could pay for them and believed in the fetishes and the abracadabra of the jungle religion.

For a price *ouangas* were made, but never the death *ouanga*. That was held in store only for certain handpicked individuals. Women went away with a leather pouch filled with an assortment of junk that they firmly believed would get them a husband or hold firmly the one they had. Men tied the little bags around their necks and went forth in the belief that they were now charmed and that nothing could happen to them either by physical accident or the machinations of their business enemies.

On the surface it seemed to be harmless, but there was a sinister underlying note that rang all the way from Haiti's deepest jungles. At the secret meetings *rada* drums throbbed and offerings were made to *Papa Legba*, the voodoo god. *Baron Cemetere*, Lord of the Dead, was worshipped. An amazing thing, to see mentally sound men and women falling for this kind of thing, but wealth doesn't make a person wise and voodoo reaped a rich reward from the susceptible.

Butch saw that the meeting place was nothing more than a small hall. Two men stood guard at the door and admission was obtained only through passes. Butch had none, but his orders were to remain on the outside and try to recognize as many of the adherents as possible. He knew some of those who came. Their pictures were in the newspapers often enough to make them quite recognizable.

But Butch was an outstanding person himself, so far as looks were concerned. He towered head and shoulders above most of those who arrived. It made Butch a marked man and he was growing a bit nervous as the evening went on. The two men at the door eyed him suspiciously. Four other men, apparently lounging along the street, also kept him under their observation. A more astute person than Butch might have noticed this. Each time a car pulled up, Butch made a cover notation of the marker plate in a notebook, but his movements were slow and lumbering.

Suddenly two of the men on the street approached him. Butch's muscles tightened. He wasn't looking for trouble at this particular time, but he never ran away from it.

"Say, pal," one of the men spoke in a hoarse whisper. "We been noticing you. What's the matter—ain't you got nerve enough to go inside?"

BUTCH took the bait whole.

"I was going in, but I see where everybody has gotta have a ticket. Say—is that voodoo stuff anything like séances with ghosts floating around?"

"It's better than that, pal," one of the men took Butch's arm. Listen—We got an in, see? We can pass you by the door easy."

Instantly suspicious, Butch shook his head.

"Not tonight. Them things cost dough when you

get on the inside and I'm busted. Maybe tomorrow night, huh?"

Something rubbed against Butch's side and one of the two men leered up at him.

"We'll fix that, pal. The pass to get in is sticking in your ribs right now. Get what I mean?"

Butch got it. He couldn't very well use his enormous strength with a gun pushing against his side. He was also aware that the other two men who had been near the curb were moving in. The one who seemed to be in charge was a skinny, pale-faced runt with a constant leer around his lips. He reached into Butch's pocket and brought out the notebook.

"So you're some kind of a stool pigeon, huh? Taking down the car numbers of people who go in. Okay, pal—we'll show you what a voodoo lecture is like. Just walk nice and easy to them steps and go in. You're a big guy and you could tear me apart maybe—but bullets don't care how big a guy is. Get going!"

Butch groaned inwardly. He should have given these men no chance to overpower him like this. But it was too late now. He'd have to bluff it out if he could, and if he couldn't—his fists would have to do some overtime work.

Butch walked up the stairs. The two men at the door stepped aside. Butch lumbered down a long corridor illuminated with blue light, and he automatically turned toward the door leading into the main meeting hall. He could see a voodoo altar erected at the far end of the long room. A man in ceremonial robes was lecturing the audience. Most of them were women, looking for a new thrill, but there was a sprinkling of men, too.

The gun jabbed Butch again. "Not in there, pal," the skinny crook growled. "We got a private meeting hall for guys like you. Walk straight ahead."

They forced him up a flight of stairs to the second floor of the building. One of the men ran ahead and unlocked a door. Butch went inside, found that the room was without a window, and its walls were painted a dull gray. There were half a dozen straight-backed chairs lined up against the wall. He sat down in one of them at the implied order of the skinny man. No one spoke, but when the door closed, the four men drew their guns and flashed them openly. The skinny man straddled a chair and grinned at Butch.

"Now suppose you tell us who sent you to case this joint. Was it the cops?"

BUTCH only glared at his questioner. The skinny man growled an oath and slapped Butch across the face. Butch leaned forward, saw the crook's gun come up and relaxed again. What that skinny-faced crook didn't know was that his features were seared on Butch's brain. That slap would be repaid with a broken nose or a shattered jaw.

"Aw, what's the use trying to make a cow like him talk, Joey?" one of the other men derided. "Wait until the boss comes. He'll know how to make the mug open up."

Butch crossed his legs and began swinging one foot idly. The skinny crook suddenly reversed his gun and cracked the butt of it against Butch's ankle. The blow made Butch wince in pain. His big hands grasped the arms of the chair and sap would have been squeezed out of them if they had been made of green wood. His eyes became heavy-lidded and malevolent. Even Joey, the skinny crook, was startled by the change. He hastily got up, kicked his chair back several feet and then sat down again, forcing a triumphant grin to his lips.

There was a sharp knock at the door. One of the quartette opened it immediately. Butch all but gasped at the figure that walked in. Dr. Zuro, clad in an enveloping blue robe, had to turn sideways so that his massive shoulders would pass through the door. His thin, crafty face was somber and he walked with a swaying motion directly up to Butch.

"You were sent here to spy on us," he said in a cold voice. "By merely looking at you I know that you do not possess the intellect to work against us, therefore you are merely an agent. Who pays you?"

"Nobody," Butch declared hotly. "All I wanted to do was see what this crazy voodoo stuff was about. Then them four mugs grabbed me."

"Search him!" Zuro ordered.

With a gun buried in his stomach Butch was helpless to resist while Joey went through his pockets. Zuro growled an oath when he looked at the array of junk that Butch carried.

"Nothing to identify him. We shall have to take other means. Or—" he eyed Butch closely, "—would money make you come over to our side? We could use a human mountain like you."

Butch gave a sigh of resignation.

"Listen—I don't want nothing to do with voodoo if you guys treat people like I been handled. I think the whole business is crazy."

Zuro motioned to Joey. "Use a little physical persuasion, but be very careful. If this man should ever get the upper hand, he might be able to take all of us. Use the usual methods."

JOEY grinned from ear to ear. Before Butch could move, two of the larger men seized his wrists while the third planted the muzzle of a gun against his neck. Joey shoved a chair closer, forced Butch's hand onto the seat and brought down the butt of his

gun against Butch's fingertips. Butch uttered a cry of pain. Joey hit him again—hit him a dozen times. Not bone crushing blows. He was saving them for later, but each crash of the gun butt brought Butch half out of his chair in agony.

"Talk, you big dope," Joey howled. "I can keep this up all night."

Butch's jaws came together firmly, and from that moment on no sound came from his lips even when Joey began using more strength behind the torture. Finally Joey turned to Zuro.

"Suppose we dip one of his fingers in some oil and set fire to it, huh? I seen the toughest guy I ever knew crack like a baby when I did that to him."

Zuro was studying Butch narrowly.

"No—wait. Even that wouldn't make this man talk, but I think I know another way. Hold him firmly. Joey—get behind him and put your arm around his throat. Raise his head until he is forced to look up at me."

Zuro waited until Butch was held down by the weight of four men. Then he stepped very close, looked straight down into Butch's eyes with the beady stare of a serpent ready to spring upon a hypnotized bird. His hands moved slowly, fanning the air in front of Butch. The big man tried to tear his gaze away, but that was impossible. He tried to close his eyes, but something made him keep them open.

Zuro began spinning crazily. The whole room gyrated in a mad fashion. A gray film stole across Butch's vision.

Now he no longer tried to escape those compelling eyes. They seemed to be lulling him into a comfortable slumber. Even the pain in his fingers was gone. He gave a long drawn out sigh and his tense muscles relaxed. Zuro smiled in satisfaction. Two minutes later Butch seemed to be fast asleep.

"You see," Zuro surveyed his crew of thugs. "It is very simple. This man will do whatever I tell him. You will witness a lesson in post-hypnotism. I shall give him certain instructions. When he awakens, he will unconsciously reveal the identity of his master. Not verbally; I cannot make a man say or do anything that is distinctly against his wishes, but I can imbue this man with the idea that his master may be in danger and should be warned immediately. Wait—you shall see."

Zuro placed one of his hands against Butch's forehead. The big man muttered something, but he didn't move.

"You will listen carefully," Zuro said in measured tones. "The man for whom you work is in danger. He must be warned at once. Men are closing in on him. They are going to kill him. Only you can prevent it. You must warn him."

Zuro stepped back, motioned to his men and each one seemed to know what to do. They assumed the identical positions which they had taken before Butch was hypnotized. Joey held his head in a vise-like grip. The others clustered closely around him. Zuro gave one more order to his thugs.

"I shall awaken him. You will permit him to escape. Joey—you take one man and trail him. When you find out where he goes, return and tell me. Then, if he is an agent of the Bat, as I suspect, we shall know what even the police have failed to discover—the identity of the Black Bat."

Zuro slapped Butch across the face twice, stepped back and waited a moment. Butch opened his eyes, seemed dazed for a moment and then he shook his head violently.

"I am afraid," Zuro said softly, "that it shall have to be the burning oil on the fingers. Joey—you will prepare it."

Joey let go of Butch's throat and moved away. The other men relaxed their hold slightly. With a roar of rage, Butch suddenly leaped out of the chair, carrying one of the men with him. He seized this crook, raised him high and hurled him at the others. They all went down in a tangled mass.

Moving amazingly fast for his bulk, Butch reached the door and found it open. He darted out, ran down the steps, along the corridor and out the main door. He paused on the sidewalk, undecided for a moment what he should do next.

"I oughta go back and bust their heads," he muttered. "But the Bat is in danger. I gotta warn him. Nobody else but me can warn him. Gotta get to him—fast."

Butch began walking rapidly down the street. Joey and one of the crooks emerged from the building a moment later and ran over to a car parked at the curb. Joey was grinning like a well-pleased hyena.

Butch kept muttering to himself: "Can't lose no time. Gotta get there before they kill him. I better use a cab."

He hailed a taxi and gave orders that took him to within half a dozen blocks of Tony Quinn's home. Behind the taxi rolled Joey and his assistant, never relaxing their vigilance for a second.

Butch paid off the driver. He stood on the curb for a moment, rubbing his forehead. Deep within him was the thought that he must keep away from Tony Quinn. But surmounting this was another thought: Tony Quinn was in deadly danger. Butch didn't know how he had obtained this information, but it was in his mind and strongly implanted. He wheeled and began hurrying toward the side street which led to the garden gate at the rear of Tony Quinn's estate.

CHAPTER X
The Trap

QUINN and Silk were in the living room. Quinn, in his guise of a blind man, sipped coffee and kept staring into the fireplace.

"Things are developing, Silk," he said. "You discovered that Victor Hoffman is in a private sanitarium. Now what about Gareth Hazelton's murder?"

"That's a mystery," Silk said, "The police were baffled. I talked to servants next door to his house. For all of their testimony, Hoffman could have been at home that night. At present, anyhow, the police have no reason to arrest him, although they still have their suspicions about him."

"So Zuro must have covered it up well," the Bat mused. "He probably has evidence that would lead right to Hoffman. The whole thing could have been faked for this purpose. Well, Carol discovered things, too."

"Just a little more coffee, Silk. I've a feeling I won't get much sleep tonight. She's a marvel, that girl. Without arousing the slightest suspicion, she found out that Charles Bromley—the arms manufacturer—has been systematically cleaning out his account. Bromley was a business partner of John Chester—who was knifed to death.

"Then William Medlin—he owns the Medlin Jewelry Store Chain—he practically ruined his accounts by drawing out cash. Now Medlin was a partner of Steve Ambrus, who was murdered. Furthermore, Hoffman, Bromley and Medlin have all been interested in voodoo. You see how it ties up, Silk?"

Silk nodded very slowly, but there was still some doubt in his mind.

"Yes—yes, of course, sir. With Hoffman as a model, we might have reason to suspect that other men of his type have been framed into killing their partners. Of course Hoffman, Bromley and Medlin are connected somehow."

"No—they don't even know one another," Quinn explained. "They are in entirely separate lines of business and have never come into contact with one another. I know I've insisted that there is some underlying scheme which hooks them up and that there is more than simple blackmail to this business. I still have that feeling, but—I can't reconcile those three men under one heading. It just isn't possible."

Silk sighed, picked up the tray and started out of the room. There was a scratching at the further wall. Instantly Silk was alert, but Tony Quinn never moved a muscle.

"The window shades, Silk," he said gently. "Someone is in the lab."

SILK put the tray on a table, drew down the curtains and opened the secret door. Butch came out—a strange, disheveled Butch. Tony Quinn took one look at him and jumped to his feet.

"Butch—what happened? Your hands! Someone's been trying to make you talk."

"Boss," Butch said in a weary voice, "I came right away so you wouldn't get killed. There's guys after you. They're gonna knock you off. Everything is set and you can't escape unless I help you."

Butch pressed a hand against his large forehead, groaned and sat down heavily. Tony Quinn was at his side with a small glass of brandy in his hand. He forced this down Butch's throat and then shook him hard. "What are you saying?" he demanded. "Who were you trying to warn me against? Butch—look up! Higher—that's it. Butch—think hard! Think harder than you've ever done before in your life. Did you see Zuro? Did his men capture you?"

"Yeah—yeah. They got me. Saw me taking down numbers of the cars. Stuck a gun in my belly. Hammered my fingers to make me tell who I worked for. But I didn't tell 'em." Butch looked proud for a moment. "They were gonna set fire to my fingers by putting oil on 'em, but that funny looking guy said no. Then they grabbed me and—and I don't know what happened after that except when I awoke, I went to work on 'em and got clear. Then I came here—straight to this house like I—I was supposed to. I—gosh, Boss—I feel funny."

Tony Quinn retreated a step or two and for the first time since Silk had known him, he saw Quinn's face actually blanch.

"Silk—get my outfit. Don't ask questions! Hurry! Zuro hypnotized Butch, forced him to come directly here and I'm betting that some of Zuro's men trailed Butch. They'll know now that Tony Quinn is mixed up in it somehow and it won't require three guesses to know I'm the Black Bat. I've get to head off those men."

Silk was getting the robe and hood while Quinn talked and peeled off his tweeds at the same time. Eighty seconds after Butch haltingly gave away Zuro's plan, the Bat was racing toward the front door.

"Can't use the garden house and tunnel this time," he said over his shoulder. "They'll have seen Butch use that means of entering the house. By now they'll probably have investigated enough to know where the tunnel leads to and be starting back to Zuro."

The Bat pumped bullets into the firing chambers of both automatics, opened the front door and darted out into the night. He realized the chance he took. If anyone saw that weird, eerily garbed figure emerge from Quinn's house, a call to the police

would tip Lieutenant McGrath to the truth and McGrath wasn't one to let such breaks go by.

As the Bat hit the sidewalk, he saw a sedan turn the corner, pass the house and head toward the center of the city. The moment it came into view, he moved back, merged his own form with the darkness and held his breath. He had a fleeting glimpse of a skinny, triumphant face peering out of the car window. The Bat's heart was so low he could have trampled it under his own feet.

He looked around for some means of following the men. He couldn't have hailed a taxi if one came by. The coupé he usually used was around the corner and before he could reach it, those two men in the sedan would be out of sight.

THEN the Bat gasped, for his coupé came hurtling around the corner on two wheels. It slowed and the door opened. The Bat vaulted inside to find Butch squeezed behind the wheel.

"I used the tunnel and the garden house," Butch explained while he shifted gears. "Figured I might run into the mugs, but I didn't. Boss—you dunno how sorry I am. That Zuro guy made a donkey outta me. But I'm payin' him back, y'understand? I'll bust his fancy neck for him, that's what I'll do. Maybe I ain't so good at this detectin' stuff, but when it comes to a scrap—boy, I can take 'em. You ain't sore, Boss—"

"Shut up," the Bat said tartly. "I'm not sore. You couldn't help what happened. It just shows me what kind of a shrewd man we're bucking. This Zuro is one of the most dangerous criminals I've ever known. Lose that car, Butch, and you'll have broken your last jaw because I'll break yours. No—not so heavy on the gas pedal. Not yet. When we hit an avenue, let her out."

"You—gonna bump them two guys, Boss?" Butch asked with a huge gulp.

Under his hood, the Bat's face was frozen in angry lines.

"I don't know what I'll do. I can't just kill them. But I'll have to get hold of them and hold them under lock and key until this case is over. Then they can talk their heads off; nobody will believe them. If those men get back to Zuro and tell him where you went, Zuro can do one of two things—have his pair of weasels tell the cops they know I'm the Bat or make an attack directly on me as Tony Quinn."

The sedan picked up speed, but it stayed on the busy streets, as if the driver had a hunch of impending danger. The Bat cursed bitterly at this bad luck. It wasn't just a matter of trailing these men to their hideouts. He had to seal their lips somehow, before they reached Zuro.

The trail led completely through the business center of the city while the Bat slumped deep in the seat and kept out of sight. If a police car ever pulled alongside and an inquisitive cop looked into the coupé , all hell would break loose. And the breaks continued to be against the Bat. Not once did the sedan become trapped by a traffic light. If it had, and Butch could have pulled alongside, the Bat would have taken a bold chance of leaping into the sedan and forcing the two crooks to obey his orders. The driver of the sedan simply rolled along at a steady pace, evidently clocking the traffic lights so he wouldn't find it necessary to stop.

Finally the sedan turned off the main road, darted down a side street and took two more sharp turns before it pulled up in front of a two story, flat-roofed building that seemed to be some kind of a club. Before they were even out of their car, the Bat was streaking across the street. He plunged into a yard full of thick foliage, veered left, and made a straight line for the building into which the two man were now heading.

Desperate, the Bat used every ounce of energy he possessed, and when Joey and his pal marched up the walk to the door of the building, they passed within two feet of the spot where the Bat lurked.

ON soft-soled shoes the Bat crept out of his hiding place, walked noiselessly behind the two men. Joey took a key from his pocket, inserted it in the door and flung it wide. As he stepped in, a tornado jerked him back. Joey took a terrific thump on the jaw that sent him crashing to the floor. The other thug tried to draw a gun. The Bat was upon him faster than a hawk swoops. He plastered one gloved hand over the crook's mouth, jolted a terrific blow to the stomach and then straightened the man up with a haymaker.

Upstairs someone called down a harsh query and a demand to stop the noise. The Bat closed the door gently. He knew he didn't have time to drag these men out to the car. His super-sensitive eyes penetrated the darkness in the hallway, saw a narrow door to what seemed to be a clothing checkroom. He opened it, picked up Joey and carefully deposited him inside. On the return trip he carried the second thug. Then he closed the checkroom door, turned the key and extracted it from the lock. He shoved this into his pocket.

Someone was coming down the steps. Before the Bat could duck for shelter, the lights were turned on. The man descending the staircase was Riga, the ape-like lieutenant of Dr. Zuro. Riga saw the black hood, the wing-like cape and emitted a bellow of terror. He spurted back up the stairs like a man fleeing from a ghost.

"It's the Bat! The Bat! Boss—Boss! He's here!"

The Bat hesitated. He couldn't attempt an

escape, easy though it might be—and mighty attractive at the present moment—for he had no idea how many crooks this building housed. The fact that Zuro himself was here indicated that there might be some kind of a meeting in progress. The front door offered a simple way out, but an invisible barrier lay across it: Joey and his pal, now unconscious and locked in the checkroom. When they recovered consciousness, they'd talk fast and Tony Quinn would be eternally linked with the identity of the Black Bat.

For a fraction of a second the Bat toyed with the idea of opening the checkroom door, pumping a slug into the heads of both men and running for it. Two things squelched that. The Bat didn't run and—he didn't commit cold-blooded murder, not even if it meant that his own existence was at stake.

He was prepared for a certain number of strong-armed brutes to be in this building, but never for the horde that suddenly started racing down the staircase. There were more than a score of them. Their numbers were great enough to impede their approach.

Two held automatic rifles. One of these came fast up and spat. The Bat's gun appeared in his hands faster than the eye could follow. It blazed and the thug with the spitting machine gun threw up his arms and sagged back against his companions. The floor at the Bat's feet was perforated with slugs. A split-instant longer and that gunman would have had the range.

THE Bat sidestepped into a big room. Blue light filtered down, making a grotesque shadow of his costume against the further wall. There wasn't a window in the room, nor any other door, and the thugs were swarming like flies near the one entrance.

Like the voodoo temple where the Bat had found the murdered G-Man, this room was lavishly furnished with heavy blue velvet drapes hanging from all the walls. A crude temple in one corner and all the paraphernalia that went with voodooism and its practices. The building was of brick and probably soundproof. The Bat recalled that the front door had been exceptionally heavy and required plenty of Joey's strength to open. Heavy steel, probably, and tightly fitted to the door case.

Someone, bolder than his mates, gave a rush into the big meeting room. He held a cheap nickel-plated revolver and blazed away at the shadowy form near the far end of the room. The Bat's left gun cracked. The thug doubled up, dropped his revolver and rolled silently onto the floor. That checked the others for a moment.

The Bat yanked up one of the heavy drapes. He had a solitary chance. Behind these drapes he was completely hidden from the view of anyone in the room. They were long enough to hide his feet, copious enough to prevent his body from making any noticeable bulge. He ducked beneath them and sidestepped rapidly toward the corner nearest the door. He could hear the buzz of excited voices in the hall. Above them came Zuro's voice, issuing angry commands.

"He is trapped. There is no possible way of getting out of that room. Five thousand dollars to the man who has nerve enough to go in after him. Remember—he is just as human as you. Your stories of seeing him fly are just figments of your overworked imaginations. Riga—you go in there and gun him out."

"N-not me, Boss," Riga answered nervously. "That guy may be human, but he don't shoot like nobody I ever knew. Did you see how fast he nailed Ziggy? And Ziggy was no slouch with a roscoe neither."

"You pack of miserable cowards," Zuro yelled. "What do you think we can do? Stand here until he starves to death, perhaps? Riga—go out to the car and bring in the tear gas. The bombs you stole out of that police car weeks ago. I knew we'd have use for them someday!"

"Yeah!" Riga's face lit up in savage enthusiasm. "We'll gas the skunk out and burn him down, huh?"

"We'll do more than that," Zuro replied harshly. "There are over a dozen of the bombs. We'll throw them all into that room, close these sliding doors and wait. That's all—just wait. There will be gas enough to make the Black Bat pass into unconsciousness. Even tear gas can be dangerous. Then we'll have him. I want to take the hood off his face, see who he is, and then kill him slowly. Are you sure he came alone?"

RIGA looked around helplessly. "Gosh, I dunno, Boss. I just started down the steps to see what all the racket was about, and then—I saw him. I wonder what happened to Joey and his pal?"

"Dead probably. Killed by the Bat," Zuro exclaimed. "Which is all the more reason why we should execute him slowly. Send men outside to watch. We've made this place soundproof, but we can't take chances."

Riga sped away to get the tear gas. Other men darted out of the building to take up advantageous positions. Behind the thick drapes, the Bat shivered at the venom in Zuro's voice and the crafty plans he had made. Once the sliding doors for this meeting room were closed, with a dozen tear gas bombs inside, the Bat was doomed and he knew it.

By careful manipulating at the fastest speed he dared to exert, the Bat was rapidly nearing the door

The Bat sent lead flying at the oncoming gangsters.

itself. He had planned and hoped that the whole bloodthirsty lot of them would charge into the room, shooting. Then he might have slipped from behind the drapes well to the rear of the attacking mob and gained a more secure spot to stand them off somewhere else in this place. It was still impossible to give any kind of an alarm. Joey and his friend were still in the checkroom.

Riga returned in a few minutes. He crouched near the door, waiting for Zuro's signal to start throwing the bombs. Another of the thugs slid one of the doors shut and then began pushing the other one toward the middle of the doorway. The Bat, standing erect behind the drapes within striking distance of the door, held his breath and murmured a little prayer.

CHAPTER XI
The Face Under the Mask

"YOU in there!" Zuro called out. "Black Bat! Will you surrender? Throw your guns into the middle of the floor and walk to the door with your hands in the air. Or shall I have a dozen tear gas bombs thrown in there and seal you in the room with them? I'm looking at my watch now. You have exactly thirty seconds to act."

The Bat wet his lips. He had reached a break in the drapes. He was still completely concealed, and those killers outside believed him hiding in some shadowy corner at the further end of the room. He could leap clear whenever he chose. If the problem of silencing Joey and his friend hadn't been so paramount, the Bat might have risked a charge straight into the horde of killers waiting for him.

He knew the temperaments of thugs. When they outnumbered a victim, they were brave enough and plenty tough. But when they had to duck bullets—and well-aimed ones—they were apt to retreat instead of making a stand of it. The two men who had trailed Butch to Tony Quinn's home kept the Bat from trying that. Leaving this place without them would mean the end of the Black Bat just as much as facing the guns of Zuro's men.

"Your time is up," Zuro grated. "Throw them in, Riga."

Through the slit in the drapes, the Bat saw one of the cans come hurtling into the room. But Riga threw hard, believing that the Bat was far from the door. The bomb burst, throwing out a cloud of heavy white smoke. Another can struck the further wall, bounded halfway across the room and exploded.

The Bat hastily stuffed one of his guns into its holster. Enough of the fumes filled the room now so that his movements were masked from the sight of those gathered around the door. He took a long breath of fairly fresh air. One thing to his advantage lay in the heavy drapes. They held the fumes in check.

Then the Bat found another part in the curtains, peered out and waited. He could hardly see the door now. He heard Riga grunt and the sound of the bomb whistling through the air. Like a flash, the Bat sprang from behind the drapes. The bomb landed on the floor, bounded up, and the Bat lunged for it. Without a wasted motion he hurled the ready-to-explode bomb straight back toward the door. The fog created by the gas made his target barely visible, but his aim was true. The can broke in the hallway.

Zuro yelled a string of shrill curses. His men scattered and the Bat waited no longer. His eyes were already brimming with tears. He had no defense against that gas and it brought back memories of those nearly fatal few moments in court when acid had been hurled into his face.

He reached the doorway. Two thugs were groping about and one spotted him. He raised his gun. Something lunged out of a doorway just behind him. Something that looked like an elephant. The thug's gunhand was struck a blow that shattered the bones of the forearm. Then he was picked up bodily and hurled viciously into a corner.

"Make a sucker outta me, will you?" a lusty voice shouted.

"Butch!" the Bat cried softly. "Over here—by my side."

"Yeah—yeah—in a minute," Butch answered. "I got a little job to finish."

THE second thug, fighting back tears brought on by the gas, was backing into a corner. He had dropped his gun somewhere and he began squealing in terror as the giant form loomed up before him. Butch grabbed the man by the scruff of the neck, held him at arm's length and slammed his head against the wall. Nothing more was needed,

"Them other rats ran upstairs," Butch said. "Boy, you nearly cooked me with that tin can of gas. I ducked just in time. The stuff is gettin' me, Boss. We gotta get outta here."

"Now!" a hoarse voice shouted from the top of the stairway. A fusillade of shots banged out. But the Bat was just as fast. He jolted Butch a hard blow, sent him staggering toward another room and dived in there himself.

He risked one quick glance into the hallway. The thugs were coming down the steps. They had soaked pieces of cloth in water and were holding them to their faces. It helped enough so that they were able to attack in force. The Bat fired four quick shots and checked the assault. Butch was racing toward a window across the room.

He yanked off his hat, balled it around his fist and smacked the glass a husky blow. It only splintered. Butch blinked in pain and used another method. He raised one foot and kicked a hole in the supposedly shatterproof glass—shatterproof until something like Butch's number fourteens hit it. Cool, fresh air seeped into the place.

"I'll get us out," Butch called back. "Just hold 'em for half a minute—"

"Get yourself out," the Bat answered in a whisper. "I'm not going until I get those two men who trailed you."

Butch's face fell. "Gosh—I forgot all about 'em. But what are we gonna do?"

There was no time for explanations. Goaded by Zuro and Riga, the band of killers started a charge into the room. The Bat's guns flamed and then clicked on empty clips. A roar of triumph went up from the attackers as they prepared to finish the job. Three of them came plunging wildly through the door.

At that instant Butch's brain clicked. He wondered about that for weeks afterwards. Well over six feet in height, he had only to give a brief running jump, hurl himself high into the air and wrap both mighty fists around the single chandelier in the room. He dragged the fixtures completely out of the ceiling and every light in the place winked out.

The attacking men paused, blinded now by the inky blackness. But not so the Bat. He rushed to Butch's side and spoke soft orders. Butch hastily pulled the belt out of his trousers and the Bat took it. Then he saw the thugs filling the room, spreading out to encompass their victims in a human net. In one solid line, they started across the room.

The Bat had his back against the wall, and as they approached he could see every movement. With a quick jerk of his body, he slipped by the man nearest him. Zuro and Riga, both armed with submachine guns, formed the rear guard. They were just inside the doorway.

With no more noise than a prowling cat, the Bat slipped by them and in a moment was running lightly up the staircase. There was a good sized landing at the top. He leaned over the rail and waited. Butch was still in that room. If he was unable to battle his way clear, the Bat intended sailing into the fight again. He was quickly reloading his guns in the darkness.

The house was filled with a deep silence broken only by the hoarse breathing of the men who sought to locate their victims in the room below. Then that silence was broken by a sudden clattering as if someone clawed at a closed door.

"They're in the hall," Zuro shouted. "In the checkroom, Riga—over here. This time we won't give them a chance. Raise your gun and blaze away until the drums are empty."

The Bat saw Zuro and Riga line up, point their weapons at the closed checkroom door. He started forward involuntarily, but before he could do anything both guns cut loose. The clatter was a devil's din, masking all other sound. The Bat saw a man's form come hurtling out of the room, hit the wall in the hallway and slump down. It was followed by Butch, driving a clear path to a point just below the landing.

The Bat leaned over the rail. He dropped Butch's belt, swung it a few times and hit the big man on the head with the buckle. Butch reached up, took a firm grasp on it and the Bat exerted all his strength to pull him up.

All this was done so swiftly and silently that no one below was aware of what happened. Someone found a flashlight and sprayed the checkroom door with it. The submachine guns had put a hundred holes in the panels and Zuro had sent the last of the drum smashing into the lock. He approached the door, grabbed the knob, and yanked it open.

Two bodies slumped out, lifeless and covered with blood. Joey and his pal rolled over on their backs.

Zuro howled in dismay. He grabbed the flashlight out of the hand of its owner, sprang into the other room, throwing all caution to the wind now. Behind him came Riga, rifle ready.

"Gone!" Zuro cried. "They've got away, but there's only one door and we know they didn't go out that way. They're upstairs. After 'em, you pack of stupid pigs. What are you afraid of? The Bat's guns are empty."

Zuro came back into the hallway, raised his flash a bit and then suddenly snapped it off. Outside, sirens were howling dismally.

"Run for it," Zuro shouted. "Every man for himself. It's the damned police. With the window broken, someone heard the shooting."

ZURO darted back into the room where Butch had broken the window. There was a sound of more glass being smashed. Some of the thugs opened the front door, saw two police cars in front of the place

and half a dozen men running toward the house. They slammed the door shut, headed up the staircase, and the foremost of them suddenly felt his feet leave the steps as he was raised high. Butch sent him crashing down on top of his fellow thugs.

Someone below raised a gun and began shooting wildly. Butch heard a low moan behind him, swiveled around and then he heard the thud of a body hitting the floor. Hampered by darkness, he bent down, flailing his hands around.

"Boss!" he said in an agonized voice.

Then he found him. The Bat was sprawled on the floor near the landing. Below, the front door flew open under a savage attack by the police. More guns cracked. The remaining thugs, trapped in the hallway, promptly raised their hands.

Butch knew only one thing to do. He scooped up the Bat, handling him as easily as an average man might carry a five-year-old child. He ran along the corridor, saw an open door and went in. He heard feet pounding up the stairs—and then Butch's heart really fell down to his shoes.

Lieutenant McGrath's voice came raucously from just outside the door,

"We've got them all, I think, but to make sure, you boys who aren't busy with the prisoners go outside and cover all exits. Half of these rats got away through a broken window already."

Butch felt sweat pouring down his face, McGrath's flashlight was already spraying the corridor. He carefully laid the Bat down on the floor. He had no idea as to whether he was alive or dead,

The police stormed into the house.

but either way he had to get him clear. There was no describing Butch's feelings. Sorrow, rage and consternation merged into one gigantic wave of desperation. He needed the Bat's swift wit, but the Bat lay stretched out on the floor, probably dead. Butch heard McGrath approach toward the room. The ray of his flash stabbed the darkness. Butch moved fast, flattening himself against the wall just inside the doorway.

McGrath stepped into the room, gun in hand and ready for trouble. The flashlight's ray swept across the floor, darted over the Bat's legs and then stopped abruptly. The spot slowly raised until it centered on the Bat's hooded head.

"Well," McGrath said with a gasp. "Well... and well!"

Occupied with this bit of miraculous luck, McGrath didn't hear Butch quietly sidestep out of the room. McGrath had always wondered just how he'd feel when he met the Bat and had the upper hand.

Then McGrath saw that blood stained the black robe, and he gulped. A strange compassion swept over him. Now that the supreme moment had come, he somehow dreaded it. The inert form on the floor looked dead—or as dead as a man could appear with his face and body encased in jet black clothing and a hood.

MCGRATH knelt beside the still form. He reached one hand toward the hood, hesitated and cursed himself for being such a weak sister. But what if the Bat were dead? Did he want to see the face under that mask then? See it calm and peaceful in death? McGrath felt as though he'd lost a friend. He discovered that his eyes were brimming, but not from the last traces of the tear gas in the hallway below.

"What difference does it make now?" he asked himself aloud. "He must be dead or dying. He won't care if I—I see his face. Damn them to hell and back. Back so I can tear them apart with my hands. They killed him!"

His hand touched the silken cloth of the hood, secured a grip on the lower edge of it and he began lifting the mask.

Suddenly a booming voice cut through the quiet.

"Now—let's go, boys. The cops are outside. We can get clear. Start shootin'!"

McGrath jumped to his feet. The rage in his heart took substantial form now. Those men outside were the ones who had killed the Bat. He quickly shut off his flash, tensed his finger against the trigger of the gun and prepared to leap out of the room shooting. He did leap but he stopped in mid-air as two enormous arms circled his waist, lifted him high and hurled him over the railing to the hallway floor below.

McGrath landed heavily and lay there stunned for a moment until some of his men, busy searching the other rooms, came in answer to the racket. They helped McGrath to his feet. He swore lustily, grabbed a gun and flash from the man nearest him and raced up the stairs again. No one stepped out of the darkness to intercept him. He reached the room where the Bat lay, and he held his breath as he turned the flashlight toward the corner. The black clad man still lay there.

McGrath didn't approach him yet. He called his men up, helped them search every room on the second floor until there was no question but that they were empty.

"One of those mugs must have been trapped up here," McGrath muttered. "He maybe dove out of a window and the boys missed him. Okay—go downstairs, all of you. Keep your eyes peeled."

McGrath returned to the room where the Bat lay. He walked deliberately up to the form, knelt again and slid a hand under those black robes. There was no heartbeat. McGrath mumbled something that sounded like an apology, and then he carefully removed the hood.

McGrath slumped from his kneeling position to an awkward squat on the floor. The face under the hood was that of the toughest looking mug he'd seen in many a day. McGrath blinked, looked again and shoved his hat to the back of his head. Then he jumped to his feet and emitted a roar so lusty that it made his throat ache for hours.

CHAPTER XII
Fifty Grand Bundle

Flat on their stomachs, the Bat and Butch were hugging the flat roof of the building. The Bat had recovered consciousness, and be was laughing softly.

"Butch—no matter what you've ever done before in your life, you've paid it all back to me. If I ever accused you of being dumb, that I also take back. That bullet caught me high in the shoulder, just a flesh wound, but it must have been a forty-five slug, because it jolted me around so hard that my head hit the wall and knocked me out."

Butch was still shaky. "Y-yeah, Boss. Gosh, I thought you was a goner. But no matter what, McGrath wasn't going get a look at you, dead or alive. I got him outta the room, threw him over the railing and lugged one of them mugs you plugged back with me. I put the robes and hood on him."

The Bat laughed softly again. "I'd have given a year of my life to have seen McGrath's face when he uncovered that thug. Listen—they're leaving. Zuro, Riga and most of his men got away through

the window you smashed. McGrath probably searched the place, but I imagine he's just sore enough to be careless and forget the roof—which is all to our good fortune."

Butch grinned. "That's a break, huh, Boss? And say—I took the coat and pants offa that lug I put in your place. I figured maybe without your mask and cape you'd need some kind of an outfit to disguise yourself with. They're over on the roof—just above the window I carried you out of. Was that a tough job! I draped you over the sill, climbed out and pulled myself up. Then I hung over, got your arms and pulled you up, too. Y'know, Boss, I'm beginnin' to think that bein' with you is makin' me smart. A year ago I'da never thought of these things."

Butch crawled over to where the heap of clothing lay. He carried it back.

"I took the pants of other guy, too. You plugged two of them hoods first off and they landed on the floor upstairs."

"Two pair of pants?" The Bat asked. "Why?"

Butch yanked the belt out of one pair of trousers. "I gave you my belt downstairs so you could hoist me to the landing."

Butch pulled the second belt free, took a firm grip on it and ripped the buckle off. Then he tied both belts together, strung them through the loops on his trousers and the ends met with an inch or two to spare. Butch was no pantywaist.

"Imagine me lugging you around and my britches falling off every step?" he asked sourly. "That's McGrath's fault, but it's funny, Boss. No kiddin', I heard McGrath damning to hell the mugs he figured plugged you. I think the guy was sorry."

The Bat, clad only in his black silk shirt and the black trousers, pulled on the borrowed coat. He automatically plunged his hands into the coat pockets.

"McGrath acts tough and if he could land me by his own wits, he'd turn inside out in delight," he said. "But McGrath isn't quite as tough as he pretends to be. I like the man. I—what's this?"

BETWEEN the Bat's still gloved fingers was a chessman. A chessman of death, carved after the fashion of a skull.

The Bat whistled softly. "A mug carrying around one of these," he ejaculated. "And McGrath finding one on another crook. That murdered G-Man certainly had a good reason for trying to hide the chessman at his feet. Now I'm sure this is a clue. Let's get away from here. I wonder if McGrath found the coupé?"

Butch shook his head. "I rolled that baby down the street a long ways."

"Good. We'll have to hurry because McGrath is too busy now to think, but when those prisoners are booked, he'll be burned up just enough to make a flying trip out to Tony Quinn's house. Tony Quinn must be there when he arrives. Not polite for a host to be absent."

They left the roof by the same means Butch had used to get them out of the house. One patrolman had been left guarding the front door. The Bat smiled and motioned Butch into the shadows. Carefully the Bat crept up behind the patrolman. He reached out, curled an arm about the man's neck and dragged him back into the house. He held the man down, ran sensitive fingers around his throat and found vulnerable nerves. He squeezed slightly and the patrolman folded up, cold-decked. The Bat reached into his hip pocket, removed a small oil skin lined pouch and took out a small sticker, fashioned in the shape of a bat. He pasted this on the patrolman's forehead and on second thought tucked a twenty dollar bill into his limp hand.

"He'll be out for twenty minutes," the Bat explained. "A wrestling trick I learned out of a book. No pain and the twenty dollars will help his headache when he wakes up."

"Sure," Butch agreed amiably, "but I'm bettin' it won't cure Lieutenant McGrath's."

They started for the door again, but the Bat suddenly touched Butch's wrist and hissed an order to draw back. A man was approaching the house. He walked slowly, like a boy on his way to a dentist. The brim of his hat was pulled very low and his coat collar was turned up, yet through the darkness the Bat recognized the cut of the man's clothes as being expensive.

The man stepped up to the door and peered inside. He gave a sigh, rapped on the panels of the half open door, and the Bat called out a gruff command for him to enter.

"It's okay," the Bat said in the same gruff voice. "There won't be no lights turned on. You can't see us that way. What do you want?"

"What do *I* want?" the man asked with a sarcastic laugh. "I'll throw this package on the floor, and I warn you—it's the finish, I'm done, and you can tell that to your gorilla master."

THE man swiveled, stalked out and disappeared. Butch hastily scooped up the package which the man had dropped. He peeled off the outer wrapper, lit a match and gave a grunt of astonishment.

"Holy mackerel, Boss, will you look at the long green? There must be forty or fifty grand here."

"Put it in your pocket," the Bat said. "I know the man who came here. He is Pierre Aumont and he owns one of the largest chains of sporting goods stores in the country."

"Yeah," Butch answered, "but he's an awful sucker. That guy thought he was paying over the

dough to them other bozos. What's he done to pay blackmail?"

"He probably thinks he killed somebody," the Bat replied slowly. "Now find the car, Butch. Drive it up to the door. I don't dare wander around without a mask. My face isn't my fortune, exactly."

Butch reached Tony Quinn's home in thirty minutes. He drove slowly by the side of the estate and a shadowy form seemed to float out of the car and merge with the darkness. Two minutes later Tony Quinn was in the secret lab, peeling off his shirt while Carol hovered over him, alarm and excitement written all over her pretty face.

"Are you hurt badly, darling? Oh, Tony. I knew this would happen someday. And McGrath almost caught you."

"But he didn't," Tony Quinn chuckled. "The wound is nothing, but you'd better cleanse it. Silk—Lieutenant McGrath will probably arrive almost any moment."

"But those men, sir—who trailed Butch here?" Silk asked anxiously.

"Dead. Forever silenced, and by the guns of their own friends. Zuro and his sidekick thought Butch and I were hiding in a checkroom. They poured half a ton of lead through the door and those two mugs absorbed most of it. Our secret is still safe, Silk, but it won't be if McGrath gets here before I'm ready for him."

Carol quickly bathed and dressed the wound, using a very light plaster for the job. Quinn sent Carol out of the lab, donned his baggy tweeds and drew an old jacket over his shoulders. He picked up his cane just as Carol came darting back into the lab.

"McGrath and Commissioner Warner are both here," she reported, an eager light in her eyes.

The film of blindness came over Tony Quinn's eyes. They were staring, wide, and perfectly dead looking. He stepped into the study, tapped his cane on the bare floor and began moving toward the hallway.

"Welcome, Commissioner—and you, Lieutenant. I heard your voices."

McGrath walked in, but he didn't sit down. Instead he eyed Quinn very grimly. Warner made himself comfortable and lit a cigar.

"TONY," he said, "McGrath is off on another one of his tangents. Seems that the Black Bat has been on the wing again and McGrath was sure he'd been shot and killed tonight. Only when he lifted the mask on the dead man's face, he found he'd captured Frenchy Phipps, a fancypants out of Chicago. Now Frenchy Phipps just couldn't be the Bat, and furthermore a patrolman posted to watch a certain place where this Frenchy had been found disguised as the Bat, was knocked out and—and one of those Black Bat stickers was pasted on his forehead. McGrath thinks there was a substitution of bodies made."

"I'm sure of it," McGrath ground out. "I'll be honest, Mr. Quinn. I expected to find you confined to your bed—with a headache or something. I was prepared to have a doctor examine you for bullet wounds. Now—I—I guess I'm wrong again."

"Sit down, Lieutenant." Quinn invited warmly. "This business of the Black Bat is the most interesting state of affairs I've heard in a long time. What kind of a case is he working on now?"

Warner answered that one. "We wish we knew, Tony. It has something to do with voodoo, and in the morning I'm ordering those meetings to be broken up. There are certain crimes you can sense, and I think blackmail is behind this voodoo business."

"Interesting," Quinn said. "Who's been paying off to whom, Commissioner? Any of my friends from the old days when I was a District Attorney?"

"We don't know who is involved," Warner answered. "If we did, there'd be a pinch. It's not the voodoo stuff alone that has me upset. Tony—the biggest crime wave—on a national scale—that I've ever known has broken out. Crooks who couldn't buy a gun off a blind pawnbroker are found armed with the best weapons money can buy.

"Furthermore—those weapons cannot be traced. There isn't a number on them—never was. The manufacturer simply neglected to have such a record affixed. About twelve million dollars in gems have been stolen through holdups. Not one of those gems has been recovered. Ordinary crooks don't operate that way. They don't possess capital enough to allow them to lay their loot aside to cool off. There's someone big and wealthy behind it."

Tony Quinn clasped both hands on the handle of his cane. He sighed deeply.

"If I could only see. Things like this interests me so much and I—I can't do a thing about it."

Commissioner Warner looked a little embarrassed. McGrath seemed doubtful, but neither said anything. Silk showed them to the door. Quinn sat down, staring into space for fully thirty minutes before he took a chance on moving. If McGrath had doubled back to do a little spying, he would have become disgusted by now and left for his office.

SILK pulled the curtains and Tony Quinn hurried into the lab. He hauled out another outfit and hastily donned it.

"I have fifty thousand dollars that belongs to a man I want to see," he explained. "I have an idea that it may serve as my calling card. Carol—stay here. Butch is home. Unless I'm wrong, things are

going to pop rather soon. I may need help—but not if there's any dangerous work, darling. Mind you—don't try tracking down clues on your own in this case. Dr. Zuro won't like it."

Butch had refueled the coupé and parked it according to orders. The Bat drove quickly away, glanced at his watch and saw that it was early morning. There was still plenty of time for things to happen. He went directly to Pierre Aumont's home, slipped up behind the house and inspected the place.

He found Aumont in his library with two men seated opposite his desk. Aumont scrawled his name on a legal looking piece of paper. Two servants entered, listened attentively and then both raised their right hands and finally signed the same paper. The visitor with pince-nez glasses folded the document, bowed and left. The other man was young, pallid looking and nervous.

The servants withdrew and Aumont and his visitor talked for a few moments. Then Aumont was alone. Or he thought so at least.

Glancing up from his desk he saw the shadow of a huge figure that looked like a bird on the wall across the room. He dived for his desk drawer, but changed his mind about grabbing the gun. A black gloved hand that felt like a grip of steel closed around his wrist.

Aumont whirled around in his chair.

"So they're resorting to Halloween schemes to scare me now. Well, I said I was finished. I paid over the money as you and your damned vultures demanded. Now you say I didn't. It's a double-cross, but it won't work this time because I'm broke. Bankrupt, do you hear? I'm selling my business and—and then—"

"The gun in your desk drawer?" the Bat asked gently. "I observed you making a will. I don't think that should be necessary. I'm not exactly what you believe. In fact I'll prove it."

The Bat placed a package of money on the desk. Aumont stared at it. He looked up at the Bat, his eyes pleading for anexplanation.

"You left this money at one of the voodoo temples tonight. But the men you expected to be there, weren't. I spoke to you. I picked up the package you dropped and—I'm returning it, asking only a small reward. Talk—tell me how these men blackmailed you. Tell me how much you've paid over and whether anything besides money was demanded."

Aumont leaned back in his chair.

"I know you're the Black Bat. I should have recognized the costume, but I'm so upset. Yes, I did make a will. My attorney, Major Botts—and my nephew, Jean, were here. Jean is my heir—what's left—although he doesn't realize all he'll get is a lot of bad accounts. Yes, they have demanded more than money. I made up my mind there was one way out and I deserve nothing more than that. You see, I—I killed a man. I slaughtered him—cut him to ribbons with a knife. Don't ask me why I did it. I don't know. Sufficient to say I'm sure I did it. You can't help me—no one can."

THE Bat sat on the edge of Aumont's desk.

"Do you know William Medlin or Charles Bromley?"

Aumont shook his head. "I've heard of Bromley, of course. He manufactures some of the weapons I sell. But I've never met him and I never heard of Medlin."

"Would you trust me—put your safety into my hands?" the Bat asked. "Particularly if I should tell you that I doubt you murdered anyone? Good—then get away from here. Go to some hotel, register under a false name. Don't leave your room, not even to eat. You'll know when it's safe enough for you to emerge, I promise that. Every newspaper will carry banner headlines."

Aumont seemed possessed of new life and hope. He wrung the Bat's hand.

"I'll go at once. I'll tell the servants to take a vacation. They'll never find me—that cursed Dr. Zuro and his mob of assassins."

Aumont arose, squelched out his cigarette and took about three steps toward the door. He stopped abruptly. Both hands reached toward his throat. He turned to face the Bat and he seemed to be trying to talk, but no sound came from his lips. His face grew flecked with red and then turned perfectly white. The Bat knew the symptoms. He reached Aumont's side in time to ease him onto the davenport.

A door opened somewhere. The Bat turned his head. Aumont's nephew, a gun in his hand, was crouched and moving forward. Like a flash the Bat leaped to one side, reached the desk and scooped up a heavy bookend. He flung it. Jean Aumont ducked and let out a wild scream of terror. Then the Bat was at his side. He wrenched the gun out of the squirming young man's hand, threw it into a corner and pushed him into a chair.

"Your uncle is dead," he said coldly. "He's been murdered. You live here and know his affairs. He was being blackmailed and for more than money. What was it?"

Jean Aumont only slumped deeper in his chair. He seemed too terrified to speak. The Bat uttered a grunt of impatience. He couldn't wait here and risk an encounter now. There were too many things to do. He drew a gun, retreated toward the window and before Jean Aumont's staring eyes, he seemed to vanish.

The mute death had struck again. How? What made it act so swiftly? What manner of drug could

strike so surely—to both kill and prevent its victim from making the slightest sound? The Bat was heading for a side street when he heard someone running. Through the darkness he saw young Jean Aumont sprinting toward the garage.

CHAPTER XIII
The Bat Intervenes

JEAN AUMONT, heir of the recently dead sporting goods store owner, backed his car out of the garage and headed north when he hit the street. Another car, traveling without lights, followed well to the rear. Unlike the average person, the Bat could see perfectly without the use of the headlights flooding the road with glare. Jean Aumont had no idea that he was being trailed.

He stopped outside a big house and as he jumped out of the car, the porch light flashed on. The door opened and the Bat had a glimpse of Major Botts, the attorney who had been with Aumont just before he died.

"Botts!" the Bat muttered to himself. "Young Aumont certainly lost no time in going to him. I wonder if he could be under Botts' thumb and if Botts could be—Zuro?"

Stealth was one of the things in which the Bat excelled. Someone who might have been watching the yard around Major Botts' residence very intently wouldn't have seen the dark blob of shadow slipping gracefully around obstructions to finally crouch beneath the window of the only room which was lighted up. The curtain was drawn almost all the way, but an inch of clear view was sufficient for the Bat's purposes.

He saw Jean Aumont gesticulating wildly. His face was white as paper, but Major Botts seemed to be taking the news calmly. He even pushed young Aumont into a chair and soothed him with a few well chosen words. Then Botts lifted the phone. The Bat raised himself on tiptoe until he could press his ear against the window pane. That remarkable hearing which had been developed during the months of blindness again served him well. He could hear Botts' words.

"Sorry to get you out of bed, old fellow," Botts said, "but it is most vital. Look here, Bromley—we're in this together and things have happened. Aumont is dead—murdered—and the Black Bat was there at the time. No—I don't think he did the killing. There's no reason for it, but—Zuro could have managed it somehow and he certainly had his reasons. In fact, Aumont expected to die soon. I drew up his will less than an hour ago. I think you'd better take precautions and plenty of them. No—wait! Don't do that! You might as well put a gun to your own temple. Don't, I say!"

Major Botts began jiggling the hook and then he hung up with a muttered imprecation. The Bat didn't see or hear this. The moment that Bromley's name was mentioned, the Bat was off, racing madly back to where his car was parked. He had checked carefully on the addresses of all the people involved in this bizarre case. He knew that Bromley lived a short five blocks from Major Botts' home.

As the Bat rounded the corner, he saw headlights streaming out of the driveway beside Bromley's place. In a flash the Bat pulled to the curb, ducked deep behind the wheel, and although Bromley glanced suspiciously at the cheap little coupé , he saw no one inside and decided it was just parked on the street for the night.

BROMLEY drove like a man in a frenzy of fear. He took corners on two wheels, stayed away from streets where there were traffic lights and seemed to be headed toward the river. His brake lights flashed on and off as he slowed. He simply let the car roll to a stop against the curb, leaped out and ran toward a big factory over which was an illuminated sign. The Bat glanced up at it.

BROMLEY ARMS AND MUNITIONS

"So he's going into his own factory," the Bat muttered. "Things are shaping up."

Bromley had the necessary keys to open the big gates and he took care to lock them again. But it took more than gates to keep the Bat out. He scaled that fence as easily as though it were equipped with a ladder. As he dropped from the top of the gate. he saw Bromley veer away from the main office of the plant and head toward one of the smaller sheds where employees filled shells with powder. Bromley took other keys from his pocket, opened the door and vanished.

"All those keys to buildings and gates Bromley wouldn't be in the habit of using mean something," the Bat told himself. "Bromley is scared, but not as frightened as he is determined. Perhaps this will show me exactly what Zuro is up to."

There would be watchmen on the premise, and the Bat kept to the shadows as he approached the small brick building. He had keys of his own, cleverly fashioned to fit almost any lock. Very quietly he inserted one, rejected it, and tried another. The fourth one turned the mechanism smoothly and the Bat slipped into the building.

As he closed the door behind him, he heard the sound of heavy pounding. Bromley was somewhere at the rear of the place. The Bat moved forward, a gun in his fist now. This was a dangerous spot for any man to be in. Rows of kegs, filled with powder,

lined the room. Machinery used in filling and capping bullets stood idle. A spark here would result in one gigantic blast and even Lieutenant McGrath would never discover who the Bat really was—not until Tony Quinn was missed.

The Bat saw lights ahead and an open door. He flattened himself against the wall behind a row of kegs, sidled toward that door and from an advantageous point he watched Bromley hard at work. Much harder at work than his official position in this plant warranted.

Bromley had stripped off his coat and vest. He stood at a long workbench and a number of automatic machine guns were piled high at his side. He had one lying before him, the breech open. He held some kind of a prick punch in his fist and was wielding a steel hammer against it. Finally he picked up the gun, snapped the breech back in place and tackled another weapon. The Bat's eyes slitted. He suddenly know what Bromley was doing and admired him for it.

THEN he heard a very faint sound, as if someone was quietly entering the building. He ducked, after he glimpsed the form of a tall man carefully approaching the lighted room. The gun in his hand glistened in the light from the room where Bromley worked. The arms manufacturer sensed rather than heard the intruder. He spun around, seizing one of the rifles as if to protect himself.

The intruder was a husky looking man with a watchman's clock slung over one shoulder, a gun in his left hand, a flashlight in his right. "Oh—it's you," Bromley snapped. "You know me, of course. I'm Bromley—president of this plant. What I'm doing here is my personal affair. Do you mind leaving?"

"Yes—I do," the watchmen replied. "Just lay that gun down, Bromley, and take a look at the roscoe I'm aiming at you. We figured someday you might try something like this. That's why I was placed here. Dr. Zuro contacted me a very short time ago and indicated you'd be coming here. Now do you get what I mean?"

The Bat chewed reflectively on his lower lip. If Zuro knew that Bromley was on his way here, then suspicion narrowed down to two people—Major Botts and young Jean Aumont. That idea would bear a careful study.

Bromley let the rifle drop out of his hand and raised both arms shoulder high.

"You—you're one of *his* men? I should have known it wouldn't be that easy, but you can tell Zuro for me that I'm through. I'll face the electric chair and all the dishonor that will go with my trial. I should have done so in the first place. I've been a fool, but I'm one no longer. I'm through, understand? I'm finished!"

The watchman smiled toothily and dug one hand into his cost pocket.

"I wouldn't be too hasty, Bromley. There are a lot of other people in the world who would suffer, too. Take your wife and kid, for instance. You got nervous and sent them away. I think your wife was wearing an amethyst necklace, one you gave her on your last anniversary. It looks something like this. In fact, I think the catch is engraved. Have a look!"

The watchman threw something on the workbench. Bromley didn't have to look. He groaned, passed a hand across his eyes. He pulled over a high stool and sat down on it, the picture of complete dejection.

"So he's resorted to this now. Very well. I know when I'm whipped. No matter what happens, nothing must harm my wife and my daughter. I'll carry on. I—I only had time to stamp numbers on one of the rifles. The—the rest will go out on schedule and exactly as Zuro wants."

"You're smart," the watchman growled. "My orders were to let you have it if you tried any tricks, and your family would have been wiped out, too. Now things stay as they were except, of course, we hold the women folk hostage. They'll be okay just as long as you knuckle under, Bromley. Now go on home and go to bed."

BROMLEY'S shoulders sagged.

"You know that Aumont died tonight," the watchman went on. "That was because he tried a double-cross. He said he delivered the dough and we know he didn't, so—he got his. The poor sap was going to commit suicide anyhow, so we just done him a favor, see? Don't get ideas like Aumont, because if you do—remember that Zuro knows everything that goes on. You'll die like Aumont did—not able to make a sound and suffering more than any hell would make you. Go on now—beat it before some of the other watchmen wonder what the president of the plant is doing around here at three o'clock in the morning."

Bromley listlessly put on his vest and coat. He jammed his hat down and walked slowly out of the place. The watchman examined the rifle that Bromley had worked on, growled a curse and threw the gun into a corner. Then he took a last look around the room, doused the light and turned on his flash. He headed toward the powder room and then stopped. There was a gun muzzle gently pressing the back of his neck.

"Extinguish the light, please!" a low voice ordered. "Drop your gun and then sit down on that stool which Mr. Bromley just vacated."

The watchman obeyed, very, very carefully. He had no idea who was behind him, but he

recognized the stern tenor of the unknown's voice. He eat on the edge of the stool and saw a shadow move before his range of vision. For a moment the Bat stood in front of the open door so that a night-light from a window at the front of the building silhouetted him faintly.

"The Black Bat," the watchman gasped.

"Then it is unnecessary for me to present my card," the Bat said. "You're in a very bad predicament, my friend. I'm afraid I shall have to kill you."

"K-kill me? But—but I haven't done anything to you. I—I'll tell all I know. It ain't much, but I'll talk."

"Then begin now and if you deviate from the truth, I'll know it—just as surely as your friend Zuro seems to know all things. By the way, who is Zuro?"

"That I don't know. Honest, I don't! I only saw the guy once. Riga handles all the details. He brought me here from the coast because the cops don't know me in the East. He got me the job and that's all I been doing. Hanging around, keeping my eye on this building and on Bromley. About half an hour ago I got a call saying Bromley was on his way. So I—I followed orders. That necklace was slipped to me a couple of days ago."

As he spoke, the watchman's right hand slithered toward the workbench and his fingers fastened on the barrel of a rifle that lay there. He talked fast, holding the Bat's attention so he could get set. But that watchman didn't know that the Bat would see as well in darkness as he could in daylight.

"Exactly what was Bromley doing to these guns that Zuro doesn't approve of?" the Bat asked gently.

"He—he was using a prick punch to number them. I don't know what it's all about. Bromley is supposed to ship guns without numbers on 'em. Where or why nobody ever told me. I—I'm just a stooge and I—I don't feel so good. I—I—"

HE sagged forward and the Bat stopped closer as if to aid him. Suddenly the watchman raised the rifle and started it down in a vicious blow meant to break the Bat's skull wide open. He rasped an oath as he aimed the blow, but that curse was broken off when the Bat's fist collided violently with the watchman's jaw. He let go of the rifle, sagged to the left and dropped like a sack of potatoes.

The Bat leaned over him, shook the man hard and brought him back to a semi-consciousness.

"What's your name and where are you wanted and for what? Talk or I'll really show you what it's like to take a beating."

"Slim Frane—Frisco—a snatch. Listen, lemme go and I'll—ohhhh!"

There was a sharp report, like that of a small caliber automatic, and Slim Frane's head snapped back. From that moment on he lost all interest in animate things.

Shortly before dawn, Lieutenant McGrath sat up in bed with a growl of annoyance. Someone seemed to be pressing his front doorbell with unusual persistency. McGrath flung on a robe, dropped a gun into the pocket of it and rushed down to open the door.

He gaped sleepily, jaw hanging open. Propped up against the porch railing was a man, his head slumped down against his chest and a huge piece of paper dangling around his neck. McGrath raised the man's head and wasn't especially surprised when he saw a Black Bat sticker fastened between the eyes. Then he read the piece of paper. The words were composed of letters cut from colored paper and pasted on.

MEET SLIM FRANE WANTED IN FRISCO
AND I'M NOT ENTIRELY DEAD.

Another sticker signed the strange note.

CHAPTER XIV
A Double for Bait

The next afternoon Tony Quinn was tapping his way along a path in the gardens about his home. Silk remained close by his side, occasionally taking Quinn's arm and piloting him around corners or up over the low curb. Finally Quinn reached out with his cane and touched a bench. He sat down and Silk occupied the other half of the bench.

Through the side gate, the one which the Bat used so often in his comings and goings, Silk saw a police radio car slow down and a siren howled briefly. The driver waved his hand and Quinn waved back. Then he chuckled. The police weren't such bad guys. Most of them knew him well and they rarely passed him by without some sign which he could hear and recognize.

Silk didn't especially like cops.

"Humph," he grunted, "if that had been Lieutenant McGrath, he'd have probably thrown a bomb in here."

Quinn leaned back and raised his apparently sightless eyes toward the sky.

"You're wrong, Silk. That dislike of policemen is a carryover from your old days when you were on the run. McGrath isn't so bad. But—to business. Last night Pierre Aumont was murdered with that unholy death that robs its victims of their speech. I've seen it work three times and I don't want to again. Which means that Zuro must fall into our hands soon."

"Got any ideas?" Silk queried.

"A pot full of them, but all vague. One thing strikes me: Aumont operated a chain of sporting goods stores. I don't think Zuro wanted him murdered because Aumont wasn't only paying over cash—he was helping Zuro in some fantastic plot. Now if Zuro wants to carry on this work, he's got to find someone to take Aumont's place."

Silk's face was alight with enthusiasm. "You mean—me?"

Quinn smiled. "You're a little fast, Silk. If Zuro somehow controlled Aumont's business, then that must be all off because the business will go into the hands of court-appointed executors. There is one man in this whole nation who operated a business similar to Aumont. The man is Alex Laurie, a Scotsman whose chain store business supersedes even Aumont's in age and size. My theory is that Zuro will tackle Laurie next. Think you can make yourself look like a Scotsman?"

Silk nodded eagerly. "Why not? Scotsmen don't look any different than other people. When do I start?"

"Soon. Tonight if we're lucky. I'll see Laurie and do what I can with him. If he refuses to listen to reason, we'll save his life by a little very illegal kidnapping. You can't make yourself resemble Laurie, but I doubt Zuro knows what he looks like anyhow. Laurie has a rather retiring nature and doesn't appear in public much. Be ready at nine tonight."

FOR the rest of that day, Tony Quinn sat lost in speculation. Theories and plans turned over in his mind, gradually straightening themselves out until he could see the light. Zuro was up to something big—bigger than any other criminal had ever attempted. The Bat had ideas how this was being done and they were ready to be put to the test. One thing he did not know was the real identity of Dr. Zuro.

There was no question in Quinn's mind but that Zuro was disguised. Every person who could possibly be suspected certainly looked nothing like this voodoo criminal. He could be anyone of them. Yet sooner or later the cleverest men make a slip. Sometimes very small and unnoticed to the average person, but Tony Quinn was somewhat above the average when it came to running down crime. When that fatal little error occurred, he'd be ready.

Young Jean Aumont had a motive for the murder of his uncle, and from what Quinn knew of him, Jean Aumont was capable of treachery. Then there was Major Botts, who seemed to represent not only the dead Aumont but Bromley as well. Was he connected with William Medlin, who owned jewelry stores—and with Victor Hoffman, who had almost died under the potency of Zuro's strange method of committing murder?

Tony Quinn spent fifteen minutes carefully cleaning and oiling his two guns. He slid home a cartridge clip in each one, pumped bullets into the firing chambers and made sure the safety devices were on. He made an anonymous phone call to the city assessor's office, ate a hearty meal which Silk served in a hurry, and at nine o'clock he and Silk were making their way along the tunnel to the garden house.

ALEK LAURIE was a bachelor and he lived alone in a modest house in the suburbs. He was middle-aged and content as a man could be. His business was good and he had no enemies. Once a week he played checkers with Milton Aldrich who lived just down the street. It formed Laurie's greatest diversion.

He was thinking about the game he'd played the night before. A brilliant game which he'd won hands down.

The jar of his doorbell startled him out of the reverie. He got up, fondled the short, square beard he had worn for years and walked to the door. He opened it and stepped back quickly. Two men entered.

One seemed to be the very criterion of a high school professor who took his work seriously. He was pompous, stout and wore nose glasses and a white edged vest. Laurie only paid the slightest bit of attention to this man. His eyes were riveted on the masked, eerie figure who held a gun carelessly in his hand.

"Don't be alarmed," the Bat said gently. "I'm no burglar. They call me the Black Bat and I've come to help you."

"Help me? The Black Bat?" Laurie seemed staggered by the idea.

The Bat stuffed his gun under the cape, took Laurie's arm and piloted the amazed, unresisting man into the parlor. The other man was busy drawing the shades.

The Bat sat down close to Laurie and spoke in a persuasive voice.

"Last night your business rival—Pierre Aumont—was murdered. I have reason to believe that the men responsible for his death killed him because they had milked him dry and he was on the verge of talking. Now, they were using Aumont for some ulterior purpose known only to themselves. With him dead they may be forced to obtain other help of a similar nature. Therefore—they may come to you."

"To me? But why, man?" Laurie asked. "Oh, I'm not saying I don't trust you. I've heard of your doings and I like the work you've accomplished. That time you routed those crooks who were substituting paste gems for real ones, right under the very noses of the shopkeepers. I said to myself,

SILK

now there's a man for you. That, in fact, is why I am receptive to anything you have to say to me now. But what can I do?"

"Disappear! I'll have someone take your place, someone who will look very much like you. If the killers come, they will meet him and he'll be able to cope with them. Aumont isn't the only man who has been murdered by these thug. There are a number of others. Also the gang has a habit of making their victims murder someone and then obtain blackmail, too. It will be profitable for you to follow my advice. You say you are receptive. This is a test of that receptivity."

"I'll do it," Laurie answered slowly. "I'll not be paying blackmail to anyone, but neither do I want to get mixed up in any murder. Where shall I go?"

"Anywhere out of the city—and start at once. Slip out of the house, walk a few blocks and then take a cab. There's a chance you are under observation now."

LAURIE was no fool. He recognized the seriousness of it all and he believed in the Bat implicitly. Fifteen minutes later he sneaked out the back door of his own home and the Bat gave a sigh of relief.

"You've had a look at him, Silk?" he told the portly man. "Go upstairs, get into some of Laurie's clothes. You have a beard in your kit. Trim it down to resemble his. Luckily he isn't a hard man to duplicate. Hurry—Zuro may strike at any moment or—I may be all wrong and Laurie is just taking a little unnecessary vacation."

"And you, sir?" Silk was already removing the disguise that had changed his appearance so radically.

"I'm going to visit Hoffman. Perhaps he's regained the use of his voice by now and can tell me something. Then I'll talk to Bromley and get the lowdown on what he was really doing at his plant. I haven't seen William Medlin yet and that must be taken care of, also. I'll be busy and so will you—if Zuro rises to the bait."

Silk watched the Bat slip sway into the darkness behind the house. Then Silk hurried upstairs and prepared his disguise. It wasn't perfect by any means, but it would get by unless one of Zuro's men happened to know Laurie very well.

Silk went back downstairs, picked up a book and settled himself down in a comfortable chair. He turned the pages without reading a word. Silk was much too excited to concentrate on anything but what the near future might hold. He knew the danger he was wrapping around himself, but that didn't worry him. Working for the Black Bat entailed danger too often, and without it Silk's existence would become monotonous now.

At eleven' o'clock he almost jumped out of the chair in excitement; his doorbell was buzzing. Silk went to the door, prepared for anything from a snatch to an assault. But the man who stood on the porch favored him with a patronizing smile and handed over a calling card. Silk read it and never turned a hair, although he wondered what brought Major Butts, the attorney, to Laurie's home.

Botts sat down in a proffered chair, crossed his legs and offered Silk a cigar.

He touched flame to it for him and then leaned back.

"You wonder why I came. My card tells you that my profession is an attorney at law. I represented Pierre Aumont until his unhappy death last night. His nephew and heir has placed Aumont's business into my hands. I think it wise to liquidate it and I thought you might be interested. I have an attractive proposition."

Silk rubbed his hands slowly as if in anticipation.

"I'm not a wealthy man, Mr. Botts. No, indeed, but I'd be willing to listen to your proposition."

Butts waved his cigar. "That's great, but we'll talk details in the morning. At present there is another matter that interests me and I am curious as to whether I am talking to a kindred agent. Mr. Laurie—have you ever been interested in voodoo? As a hobby I mean—just as some people are interested in spiritualism?"

SILK wagged his head solemnly from side to side.

"I've not many interests," he admitted. "This voodoo now—I thought it was a black inane religion!"

"Ah—it has been until recently. Why, Mr. Laurie, did you know that through voodoo it is possible to disconcert your enemies, make your friends even stronger in their attachment for you? Look—I'll prove it. Tonight I'll have you meet a good friend of mine who is a Voodoo *papaloi*—a

high priest of the cult. It is unusual, but because you have agreed to do business with me, I feel I owe you something."

Silk didn't take the bait at once. He listened to Major Botts expound the virtues of voodooism and wondered what the Bat would think if he knew that Silk probably had Dr. Zuro at his fingertips. For Silk couldn't imagine anyone else as being Zuro.

Finally Silk gave in, reluctantly. He got his topcoat and hat. Botts had a car waiting outside and he drove well out of the city until he came to what seemed to be a filling station which had gone out of business. In the square building beside the darkened pumps, lights gleamed on the second floor. Botts helped Silk out, walked up to the door and tapped smartly on the glass part of the door with his ring.

Someone came down a flight of stairs and opened up. Silk wondered if his forehead was as wet with perspiration as it felt. He was now walking straight into a murder setup with himself as the victim if he slipped the slightest fraction of an inch.

Botts accompanied him to the upper floor, pointed to a chair and then disappeared. Silk didn't see Botts again for hours. Perhaps five minutes passed and then a man beckoned Silk through heavy blue drapes. He walked into a fairly large room, saw a voodoo altar in one corner, saw a low table in another and behind it sat—Zuro!

There was no mistaking the misshapen shoulders of the man, nor the sly, sallow-skinned face. Zuro extended a hand as he arose to greet his guest.

"Ah, Mr. Laurie, I am glad to welcome you. You come highly recommended. I am here to serve you in any manner you wish. I shall describe voodoo and its objects to you. If you wish, and for a very nominal fee, I shall try to show you some experiments to prove the worth of my religion."

Silk only nodded. He didn't know what to say. Silk's personal reaction was to give a flying leap across that table, send Zuro flat on the floor and sit on him until the Bat came. But Silk had a job to do. Capturing Zuro wouldn't solve the case and others might be ready to step in and take their leader's place.

"How much?" Silk finally managed. Zuro rubbed his hands and arose. He walked over to where Silk sat and bent down until he was looking deep into his eyes. There was a certain fascination in the man. Silk found that he couldn't draw his eyes away from him. Then Zuro began to spin.

SILK raised a hand toward his forehead.

"No—do not move," Zuro said in a whisper, and Silk found that he was lowering that hand despite his own volition. Suddenly he remembered what had happened to Butch, but even this couldn't avert what was coming. Zuro's eyes were too intense and Silk's wits began to slip.

Zuro nodded in satisfaction a moment later. He walked back to the desk, opened a drawer and took out a long, keen dagger. He stepped close to Silk again.

"You will take this knife, go into the next room and kill the man who sits at the desk. You will slash him to pieces, because while you think he is one of your closest friends, he is your worst enemy and he is even now plotting to ruin you. Then after it is done, you will remember always what happened. You will forever know that you murdered a man. Is that perfectly clear?"

Silk moved his head up and down slowly. There was no expression on his face to know he had even heard the grisly command. He accepted the knife and started walking toward the door which Zuro pointed out. Silk opened it. He saw a man seated at a table, his head pillowed in his arms as if fast asleep. Silk stepped close to the man, raised the knife.

CHAPTER XV
The Elusive Bat

IT was with reluctance that the Bat had left Silk, but he couldn't afford to spend any time guarding the place. If Zuro or one of his emissaries came, there would be no personal danger for Silk. They needed the man they thought was Laurie—needed him alive. Besides, there was no indication that they might seek him out tonight nor for several nights yet. The Bat sent his coupé roping toward the sanitarium where Victor Hoffman was hidden.

Silk had provided a complete description of the place, even to the location of the room where Hoffman was hiding out. The sanitarium wasn't a big place and it was long after visiting hours. The Bat found a window to an operating room open. He crawled through it, examined the room intently, and even in the pitch darkness he saw that it hadn't been used in weeks. There was even dust on the operating table and the huge lamps suspended above it.

The hallway was empty and the place very quiet. No attendants moved about and the Bat cautiously approached a self-operated elevator. It was on the ground floor and the door opened. He slipped into it, closed the door softly and sent it to the second floor. Someone walked along the corridor in a great hurry.

The Bat waited a full five minutes before he risked opening the door a crack. Then he darted down the hallway without making a sound. He glimpsed a shadow around the corner, backed into one of the rooms and luckily found that it wasn't being used. He saw a white uniformed orderly stroll by.

Above all, the Bat wanted no one to see him

visiting Hoffman, for if Zuro heard that Hoffman was hidden here and trying to aid the Bat, then that horrible, speechless death would find its way into this small hospital—and Hoffman would really die this time.

Suddenly a woman screamed—a nerve-shattering, soul-piercing shriek that made even the Bat shiver. Now the hospital seemed to come to life. Three white-coated men came rushing down the corridor and entered one of the rooms. The door closed with a bang and the scream died away rapidly.

Taking advantage of this moment when everyone on the floor was busy with a patient, the Bat made his stealthy way to Hoffman's room. He opened the door, slid in and closed it quickly. Hoffman, propped up in bed, gave a convulsive jump and then heaved a great sigh of relief. He extended his hand and the Bat took it, held it a rather long time and then sat on the edge of the bed.

"I'm glad to see you," Hoffman said in a hoarse cracked voice. "I can't talk much. The doctor's orders."

"You won't have to do much more than nod," the Bat said. "First of all, I'm sure you are perfectly safe here. No one except myself knows where you are. Do you know a lawyer named Major Botts?"

Hoffman shook his head violently and negatively. "Do you know William Medlin, who runs a chain of jewelry stores? Or Charles Bromley, the arms manufacturer, or Pierre Aumont, a sporting goods store operator?"

"Don't know—any of 'em," Hoffman croaked.

"Then did this Dr. Zuro ask anything more of you than money?" the Bat persisted.

AGAIN Hoffman shook his head. The Bat arose.

"Thanks—that's all I wanted to be sure of. Now take my advice and remain just where you are. Zuro's days are numbered. Very soon you'll be able to go free once more. Don't think those questions I asked you are stupid. There is a lot of reason behind them and one of the men I named will answer them the way I want. Good night, Mr. Hoffman."

The Bat was out of the room in a flash. The patient down the hall began screaming again. None of the attendants charged toward the room so the Bat was certain they were all there already. He made his way out of the sanitarium without being spotted.

His visit to William Medlin's home was without result. The owner of the nationwide string of jewelry stores was out, the house was dark and empty. Bromley's place was well lighted, however. The Bat knew that Bromley had dismissed his servants, and his wife and daughter were in the hands of Zuro, held as hostages to insure Bromley's complete cooperation with their schemes.

Bromley opened the door himself, stared at The Bat and then his face lighted up.

"For a moment I was sure my eyes were going back on me. For days I've been running in bad luck and now—you arrive just when I need you most. Help me and I'll talk. I'll tell you details of a plot that will blow the lid off the biggest case you've ever heard of. Zuro kidnapped my wife and daughter. A moment before you arrived, I had a phone call—from my wife. She escaped him somehow and she's waiting for help. I—I can't call in the police. Believe me, that would ruin everything. But if my wife is safe, she can tell where they have my daughter held."

The Bat said nothing, but there were ideas racing through his mind. He waited for Bromley to regain his breath and continue.

"She says that they are searching for her. She found a state highway tool house where there was a phone—that's how she was able to call me. She is hiding along a little used country lane. If you follow Highway Forty due north until you see a knoll with a single tree on it, you will also find a telephone pole numbered"—Bromley consulted a pad on his desk—"239751. Just beyond it is a lane. If you drive up it, she will come out to meet you."

"Why don't you go yourself?" the Bat asked bluntly. He didn't like this setup.

"Because Zuro may send some of his men here—to see if she contacted me. If I'm gone, they'll know she did and then—then we'll be no better off. I'm frantic. You've got to help me. I won't talk unless you do."

The Bat nodded, wheeled and raced toward the street. He piled into the coupé , gave her the gun and roared away. When he reached the highway, traffic was very thin and he had time to think things over.

IT occurred to him that if Bromley was faking this incident, he might be sending the Bat into a dangerous trap. The fact that the watchman had threatened Bromley meant little to the Bat, for Dr. Zuro's men didn't know his real identity and there was a possibility that he might even be Bromley—Then, too, a woman who had just escaped from a kidnapping wouldn't be able to notice such things as telephone pole numbers. Most women don't even realize they are numbered. More and more the Bat sensed danger closing in around him.

He located the pole and the lane. It was narrow, very dark, with heavy overhanging branches, and it was rutted so deeply that he could do nothing more than let the coupé have its own head. He rocked crazily along this stretch of road until he saw it curve suddenly.

Instinct warned him that here would be the best possible spot for ambush. An impulse that he couldn't resist caused him to pull upon the dash

throttle to keep the car going at normal speed. Then he opened the door, stepped to the running board, closed the door softly and jumped.

The deep ruts guided the wheels of the car automatically and it kept on rolling along. It even negotiated the curve without climbing over the deep ruts. The Bat was running softly through the brush, almost keeping pace with the machine.

Then things happened. Suddenly the silence of this rural section was split by the stabbing fire of at least four submachine guns. The coupé kept on going for several more yards before bullets found vulnerable marks. It stopped, but kept on rocking crazily. Bullets continued to spang against its metal sides. The Bat saw the windows smashed. Even bulletproofed glass couldn't withstand the power of heavy rifle bullets at close range.

Then, with a shout of triumph, four men came out of the darkness to rush upon the car. They kept their guns ready as they surrounded it. One man grabbed the handle of the door beside the driver's seat. He had a little trouble opening it because several bullets had flattened the lock. Finally, by sheer strength, he pulled it free. All four men drew closer. Someone emitted a cry of horror.

"He ain't there. The Bat ain't human. Nobody got outta this bus. Nobody could have ducked them bullets, and he was driving the car when we let go."

"Let's get outta here," someone else suggested. "Me—I'm cutting loose. I don't mind bucking the cops, but this Black Bat—he's like a ghost. Nobody can kill him. Come on, boys—this ain't no place for us."

All four of them raced toward a big tree. Beneath it they had parked a fast sedan. The driver piled into the front seat reached for the transmission key and found nothing. He gasped in alarm.

"The key musta fallen out. Find it. Hurry. If we didn't get the Bat, he'll come back for us."

ALL four piled out again and, using flashlights, began to search the ground. One of them looked up and gave a choked cry. He automatically turned toward the car where the guns were piled on the back seat, but he didn't make a try for them. His warning cry brought the other three to attention. Four pair of arms rose toward the sky. Four throats grew dry.

Nonchalantly leaning against the big tree was a weird figure in black. Wings seemed to sprout from the shoulders and the head was encased in a close fitting hood. There were two guns in the hands of this creature.

"You were right," the Bat said softly. "I did come back. Line up—all four of you. Turn your backs toward me. Heaven help the man who makes a single move. I saw the cowardly way you tried to gun me out. My trigger fingers are itching badly. They'd enjoy planting a few chunks of lead in your ratty hides."

One by one the Bat searched the men, removing sidearms from holsters, then he backed up to the car, slipped behind the wheel and inserted the key, which he had removed before the men reached the car. He started the motor.

"Keep your hands very high!" he snapped. "Walk directly in front of the car. If you try to break for it, I'll riddle you with lead or run you down. Travel!"

It was a strange procession that moved up Highway 40. A passing state trooper on patrol duty saw it and blinked. When he was at last certain this was no dream, he turned around and tore back. Now the four men halted, but their hands were still high. The car was stopped, too. The trooper, service pistol in his fist, climbed out of his car and approached the sedan. He kept the quartette covered, yanked open the door and blinked some more. There was no one in the sedan.

He stepped in front of the four terror-stricken men and gasped.

"I don't know how come all this," he said in a puzzled tone, "but I know four wanted men when I see them. Okay—keep your hands just the way they are and start marching. I'll be in the car right behind you!"

One of the men was unable to restrain himself.

"Ain't the—the Bat in that car?"

"It's empty," the trooper answered, "but my gun isn't. What's this stuff about the Bat?"

The trooper got his answer from the siren of his own patrol coupé . It roared by him, howling a derisive note. He had a glimpse of a hooded figure in black behind the wheel.

"So it was the Bat," he grumbled. "Well, he didn't hurt me none by putting these hoods right into my lap. I ought to get my stripes out of this."

Then the strange procession began once more, with four men marching ahead of a slowly moving car. Miles south, the Bat turned his borrowed police car into the quieter avenues of the city, parked it close to the side street near his estate, and two minutes later he was giving Butch instructions to take the car blocks away and return immediately.

CHAPTER XVI
Butch Takes a Trip

SLOWLY Butch came up the ladder from the tunnel. He found Quinn pacing the floor of the lab.

"I'm worried about Silk," he said. "He should have returned by now. I phoned Laurie's home and got no answer. This puts us on a spot,

Butch. A plan I didn't intend using, yet must be put into action immediately.

"Silk may be perfectly safe and then again he may not be. We can't afford to take the risk. Within an hour I want you to rent a car, drive to Philadelphia and get there about the time business begins for the day. I'll give you two things to work with. One will be a handful of gems. I have enough in the safe. The other will be—this."

BUTCH took the chessman shaped like a skull and held it in the palm of his hand as if it were red hot.

"When you reach Philadelphia, go to the jewelry store operated by William Medlin. It's one of a chain he owns. Walk in, show the gems I'll give you and then put that skull chessman on the counter. Don't say a word. Let the clerk handle things from that point. They'll buy the gems from you. Squawk about the price as all thieves do when they sell their loot. But take it and get out fast. Return here immediately. Is that clear?"

Butch nodded. "Got it, Boss. But me, I don't like handling sissy stuff like this when Silk's maybe getting his head beat off. Them babies ain't gentle. My fingers are still sore from being banged around."

"Start within an hour," the Bat ordered, "Your job is almost as important as rescuing Silk, and I'll try to manage that. Oh, yes—contact Carol as soon as you leave here. Tell her to come at once."

Butch slid down into the tunnel and was gone. During the time which elapsed between his departure and the arrival of Carol, the Bat was busy. First he studied several books on toxicology, consulted other deep treaties on voodooism.

When Carol arrived, her features were grim.

"Silk is missing," he told Carol. "There are things to do. As soon as the records division at City Hall opens up, I want you to check certain things. I've written them on this piece of paper. Get the dope and I'll meet you here in the morning—probably around noontime. I've sent Butch on an important mission, one I'd rather have had Silk handle because he's smoother. I must cover Butch because he may run into some stiff opposition. We have to chance leaving the house empty. If McGrath or anyone else comes, I'll cook up an excuse for Silk and me being away."

"Then things are coming to a head?" Carol asked. "You've really begun to close in?"

"Yes—if my luck holds out. I've got to change clothes. I'm going to Philadelphia and because I'll have to operate in broad daylight, it won't be as the Bat. Fortunately, I've never had many dealings in the Quaker City. No one knows me so I'll be comparatively safe. Don't worry, darling, but this time tomorrow I hope to have ironed out the wrinkles on Commissioner Warner's forehead."

THE Bat realized the danger into which he was putting himself. He was no master at disguise and there was nothing that could remove all traces of those hideous scars around his eyes anyway. He resorted only to a wide brimmed hat that could be pulled low and a coat collar turned up as far as it would go.

Compactly hidden in a secret compartment of Tony Quinn's own car was the Bat's outfit. There wasn't even time to rent a car. The disabled coupé was out of the game forever, but if the police located it, the Bat wasn't especially worried.

The registration was in a mythical name and could never be traced. There were no fingerprints, for the Bat always wore gloves.

Butch's might be there, but he had no record.

Thinking of fingerprints brought back Carol's astonishing experience with Zuro. Carol noticed things and remembered them. Zuro's hands had been bare.

He'd handled her cigarette case, which should have taken perfect impressions of the voodoo master's prints—yet there were none.

With morning well on the way, the Bat was in strange territory and he felt much safer. Yet he didn't relax his vigilance for a moment. He parked the car, went into a drugstore and phoned Alek Laurie's home. If Silk was back, the Bat would feel much easier. A woman's voice answered.

"No, sir, I'm the housekeeper," she replied to the Bat's query. "Mr. Laurie wasn't home when I got here this morning. Very strange, too. I've been wondering if I should phone the police."

"Don't be foolish," the Bat answered. "He may be only out for a walk—or handling some urgent business that couldn't wait."

"That's true, sir," the housekeeper agreed, "I found a card on his desk. Maybe he went out with the gentleman who left it, and him being a lawyer makes everything all right. The name on the card, sir? It says—Major Botts, Attorney at Law."

The Bat hung up with a deep frown. Major Botts! Why had he visited the man he supposed was Laurie? Had Botts been responsible for the sudden disappearance of Silk? Was he one of Zuro's handymen or even Zuro himself? Botts was clever enough and crafty. The finger of suspicion which had fastened so firmly on Bromley now shifted to Botts.

The Bat shrugged. In good time he'd find out who was who. Meanwhile there was Butch to look after. Butch's particular job required tact and suaveness, something almost utterly lacking in the

good natured bruiser who was more apt to use his fists than his brains.

The Bat knew the make and number plates of the car Butch had rented. He spotted it parked about half a block from a flashy-looking jewelry store doing business under William Medlin's name. The Bat reflected that in all this scheming and plotting, Medlin seemed to have steered clear of contact with all the parties involved.

THE Bat parked close behind Butch's car, slumped down in the seat and kept his head down by pretending to read a newspaper. It prevented any passerby from noticing his features and the deep scars engraved on them, yet he was constantly able to watch the jewelry store. Butch must be already inside. If things went wrong, all hell was bound to pop in just a few moments. Yet Butch's task was comparatively simple if he kept his wits about him. He wasn't known in town.

Then the Bat had a shock. A car pulled up, parked double for a moment and one man clambered out. It was Riga, the thug who acted as Dr. Zuro's first lieutenant. Riga knew Butch, had seen him and would recognize him. Butch wasn't the type to pass anyone's scrutiny without his giant features being seared on their brains.

CHAPTER XVII
The Token

BUTCH swaggered into the jewelry store three minutes after its doors opened for business. He stepped up to the counter, pulled out a few of the gems Tony Quinn had given him, and let them spill on the counter.

"I want to sell these rocks," he declared.

The clerk looked at him keenly. "Sorry, sir. We don't buy unsolicited merchandise. You might try a pawn shop. There's one just down the street where you—"

The clerk stopped suddenly. Butch's vast fingers uncurled and the chessman that looked like a grinning skull rested on the counter. The clerk hastily shoved it toward Butch.

"I'm sorry, sir. Wait just one moment and I'll show you into the manager's office. Those are my orders."

Butch grinned in approval. This job was a cinch. He didn't know what it was all about, but that didn't matter. The Bat would know when Butch reported back to him. The clerk emerged, beckoned and Butch walked into a private office. A thick-set, wide-faced man who looked uncomfortable in a clean shirt and neatly pressed suit sat behind a desk.

"Show me the token," he snapped. "And next time don't come here in broad daylight like this."

"The—what?" Butch asked in a puzzled voice.

"The chessman. The skull, you stupid ape. And the stuff you want to get rid of." The jewelry store manager picked up the skull chesspiece and examined it critically. He handed this back to Butch. Then he shoved a jeweler's glass against his eye and began studying the gems. He leaned back.

"I'll give you a grand and a half. Where'd you get this stuff?"

Butch remembered his instructions and reached out to scoop up the gems.

They were swept out of his way.

"A grand and a half," he growled. "That stuff is worth ten times that much. And don't ask me where I got 'em. That's my business. They're here, ain't they?"

The manager allowed a slow smile to cross his thick face.

"Wise guy—and tough, too. Sometimes I think s smarter guy should pick out the babies who get the stuff for us. Okay—never mind where you got 'em. They're hot, anyhow, and that's cut the price down. I'll lift it to two grand and if you squawk I'll fling 'em back in your face. You know what that means. You're all done. Try selling 'em any place else and the cops will grab you."

"It's a deal," Butch said sullenly and set down in a chair that groaned under his weight. The manager swiveled around in his chair, twirled the dish of a small safe and extracted a thick sheaf of bills. He peeled off twenty one-hundred dollar notes and slid them across the table toward Butch.

"Now scram," he ordered. "And remember—spill one word of this and you'll die faster than you ever figured on. Next time bring in some real stuff. The town is lousy with it and you're big enough to take it away from the saps."

BUTCH stowed the money away, got up and stepped toward the door. It opened almost in his face and—Riga came in.

Zuro's lieutenant took one look and went for his gun. Butch backed up to get more room for a wide swing calculated to plaster Riga against the wall. His foot struck the chair he had occupied. Butch lost his balance, fell backwards and before he could get back on his feet, Riga was straddling him, swinging his gun butt frantically.

Riga knew that unless he worked fast, this civilized Tarzan would break him in half. The rain of blows was more than Butch could take. They pounded against his temples, against the top of his head. He reached up with both hands, aiming for Riga's throat, but Riga wasn't there. Instead, the

gun butt smashed him squarely between the eyes. Butch gave a low groan and passed out.

"What's the idea?" the manager yelled. "What's the idea, huh?"

Riga straightened up, thrust his hand into his pocket and produced another of those skull chessmen.

"The idea is that this bozo is either a fly cop or he works for the Black Bat. Either way he's dangerous and I'm putting his lights out for good."

"But not here," the manager cried. "Not here. We got to keep up the reputation of this joint. One shot will bring a million cops and only one of the clerks outside is my man. You got to get this guy outta here before you hand him the business."

Riga thought that over for a moment and recognized the wisdom of the manager's advice. He seized the phone and called an out of town number. He spoke tersely to the person who answered, hung up and glared at the manager.

"You forget that number, see? It'll be changed in a couple of days anyhow, but just keep on remembering your job goes so far and that's all. Now how do I get this man mountain outta here? Is there a back way?"

There was. Riga made sure that Butch was unconscious and would remain that way for hours. Then he straightened his clothing, walked out of the store and looked around carefully. He passed over the man who sat in a parked car studying a newspaper. There was no one else around to excite his suspicions. He signaled and his own sedan rolled up.

Riga spoke to the driver and the car turned into an alley between buildings to finally stop at a small loading platform behind the jewelry store.

Riga appeared, dragging Butch's inert body. Butch was dumped into the back seat. Riga piled in after him and drew his gun. Riga wanted to send a slug between the eyes of this huge man, but he didn't dare. Orders were orders and when Zuro gave them, it was suicide to disobey.

RIGA only hoped that when Zuro finished with Butch, he'd be given the job of finishing him off. Things hadn't been going too smoothly since the Bat horned in on the game. Many of Riga's best men had disappeared and Riga's temper was mounting. When that happened, the squat killer's trigger finger became nervous. The trip back to the city was uneventful. Riga looked through the rear window often, but traffic was very heavy on this route and only a miracle man could have followed. Butch, still unconscious, was covered with a robe. From time to time Riga kicked his victim hard, just under the chin. No use taking chances on this big lug waking up.

In the metropolitan area once more, Riga ordered his driver to head toward the river. There was an old rundown yacht club, deserted for years, overlooking the water. The car turned sharply and headed straight toward the garage belonging to the yacht club. It opened instantly and the car rolled through. Riga climbed out, grabbed Butch's feet and dragged him down over the running board and onto the floor. He tilted Butch's chin up, looked into the big man's glazed eyes and grunted in satisfaction.

"I dunno what's keeping him alive," he told the man who had been waiting in the garage, "but he's still breathing. When does the big shot arrive?"

"Nobody ever tells me that," the other man grumbled. "Nobody tells me nuthin' except get the joint ready for a car. Make sure there ain't no bums sleeping in the clubhouse. You tell me when the big shot is coming. I don't know."

Riga grinned. He was feeling particularly happy. Deep in Riga's twisted little soul was the knowledge that Butch worked for the Black Bat. By nailing Butch he had thrown the Bat back on his heels. Next time, Riga vowed, he'd take on the Bat himself.

"Help me carry this big lug into the club," he ordered his driver and the caretaker of the place. "It'll take three of us to handle him. He weighs half a ton."

Butch was dimly aware of being hurriedly carried out of a dark place and into daylight The fresh riverswept breezes served to awaken him more thean anything else. But he was too weak to even move. Wisely Butch simulated unconsciousness. As soon as his strength returned, he'd show them something.

They dumped him on a dirty floor and two men sat down to guard him. Both held guns in their hands and through slitted eyes Butch saw that they never relaxed their diligence for a second. The late afternoon sun was streaming through the windows when Riga returned and with him came a man enveloped in a dark blue velvet robe. His massive shoulders and the lurching manner in which he walked identified him even before Butch saw his cruel face: Dr. Zuro had arrived to be in on the kill.

WITH a shudder Butch strained hard to squelch, he remembered the last meeting with this men. He recalled those burning eyes, and the subtle trick by which Butch had almost revealed the identity of the Black Bat. This time Butch resolved to close his eyes tightly and not open them no matter what torture these devils devised.

"He's still out," Riga said. "I conked him good. What'll I do—put a slug through his skull?"

Zuro smiled contentedly. "Ah, no, Riga, that

would be a waste of good bullets. I had you bring him here because I have a use for him. A week ago some of the men we employ pulled a job and murdered a policeman getting clear. Part of their loot consisted of gold watches that are of no earthly use to us. Watches cannot be disguised and they are not worth melting down. This man is, without question, an agent of the Black Bat. We shall so indicate and plant on him these stolen and identifiable watches.

"I had you bring him to the river's edge because it is the best place to get rid of him. Outside in the garage you will find certain pieces of odd looking cord. It is made of paper, very strong, but it will disintegrate after it has been immersed in water for an hour or two. Tie him with that, weight him down with a few stones attached to the paper rope. When the paper breaks, he will rise to the surface for the Harbor Police to pick up. They will find the watches, discover that the man is an agent of the Black Bat and at the same time a murderous killer of policemen. He will seem to have drowned accidentally. Otherwise it might look suspicious—if he had a bullet in him."

"Good idea," Riga agreed. "But why don't you give him the business and have him lead you to the Bat again? It almost worked with Joey on his trail."

Zuro bared his teeth in a snarl.

"We failed before and we might fail again. The Bat is coming closer than you think, Riga. He is almost ready to attack and when he does—you and I shall be out of it. We have all the money we need. The Bat is clever. He will soon learn what lies behind our little plan. But—he will not learn who Zuro is, eh, Riga? Nor will you."

Riga shrugged. "What I don't know won't hurt me none. I'll tie this big bozo up and dump him in the drink."

CHAPTER XVIII
The Bat Takes the Trail

EVERY word had bean audible to Butch. Strength flowed back into his muscles slowly for he had taken a terrific beating. The two gunmen who had guarded him disappeared at a gesture from Zuro, but still Butch didn't feel capable of suddenly rising and going into an attack.

Riga began straightening out the rope. Zuro reached under his robe and took a squat tin can. He placed this on an upturned box.

"I have Alek Laurie just where I want him," he said slowly. "But I am afraid he will be of no use to us. The man is gibbering with terror and agreeing to everything we demand, but—there is no use fighting the Bat. I had no idea of his true cleverness."

Riga looked up with a peculiar expression on his face.

"You got Laurie—the guy who owns them sporting goods stores? But, Boss—that ain't possible. I cased one of Laurie's places to see how good it was for our business and I saw Laurie in there just as plain as could be. I used to know the guy. I heisted one of his places ten years ago. He testified against me and I ain't one to forget a guy who does that."

Zuro folded both hands together and chuckled.

"Then, my dear Riga, I think we may already have the Black Bat in our hands. Only someone as clever as the Bat would be impersonating Laurie. We shall soon see if—look out!"

Riga whirled around, one hand streaking toward his armpit. Butch, listening to all this, had lost his sense of balance. One thing he knew—that he must get out of this mess and save the Bat. Butch was on his feet and charging forward as Riga tried to jump out of the way. But Butch miscalculated his own stamina. His brain was still dazed from the terrific thumping it had taken. His senses refused to orient themselves and his knees felt like a deflated inner tube. Before he could even reach Riga, they buckled and Butch plunged headlong on the floor.

Riga bellowed a curse and aimed his foot toward Butch's chin, but Zuro stopped him with a sharp command.

"He has been marked enough now. Turn him over and before he awakens again, I'll have him under ether. Hand me that can."

Zuro held a knife in his hand. He slit the cap on the can, poured ether on a piece of cloth and clapped it against Butch's face. Butch, stirring already, suddenly relaxed. Finally Zuro arose and threw the rag into a corner.

"He is unconscious and breathing. When he goes into the water, the river will be sucked into his lungs. An autopsy will show he drowned... accidentally. There may be traces of ether, but I doubt any autopsy surgeon will go out of his way to look for it. Tie him up and let's put an end to it quickly."

Zuro took a chamois sack from under the robe, drew out half a dozen gold watches and fondled them for a moment as if he hated to let them go. Then he stuffed them, sack and all, into Butch's pocket. Riga finished his work and called in the driver and caretaker. They picked Butch up and staggered out the door with him. It was dark now and they took few chances of being seen.

AT the end of a short wharf they swung Butch and let him sail into the air. He hit the water and disappeared instantly.

But as Butch went under, a streak of black dove

Butch struggled vainly against inhaling the ether.

from beneath the wharf and followed Butch down. A knife went to work and in a moment Butch's head came above water directly beneath the wharf. The men returning to the yacht club saw none of this. Butch's rescuer stood erect for a moment and starlight made the flesh around his eyes glisten. Acid created scars were vividly plain for an instant. Then a black hood was drawn down over the face.

The Bat knelt beside Butch, feeling his pulse and studying his respiration. Finally Butch opened his eyes and started to groan. A gloved hand clapped across his mouth. He opened his eyes and stared in awe. The Black Bat was looking down at him.

"Be quiet, Butch. We must wait until your strength returns."

Thirty minutes went by before Butch was able to sit up. The Bat spoke in a low whisper, his lips close to Butch's ear.

"I followed you from Philadelphia. I saw Zuro go in, but I couldn't do anything. To capture Zuro now would possibly mean that we'd never find Silk."

A flash of memory made Butch jerk his head up.

"Boss, they got Silk. Zuro knows he ain't Laurie because Riga saw the real Laurie today. Zuro thinks Silk is you."

The Bat exhaled slowly. "Which means he won't wait much longer. And I'm not sure who Zuro is. I thought I was, but things have turned up."

Butch felt something heavy in his pocket and dragged out the chamois sack of gold watches.

"This stuff is hot. Zuro planted it on me to frame a murder rap. I think there's something says I work for you too, Boss. A note, it looks like Zuro is one smart guy. He knocked me cold with ether and then shoved this stuff in my pocket."

"Ether? Did you say ether, Butch?" the Bat asked quickly. "Did Zuro knock you out with the stuff? Did he handle the can of ether?"

"Sure he did. What makes you so excited, Boss?"

The Bat smiled and Butch shivered. He'd seen that smile before. It meant that the Bat was ready to swoop down and smash his prey in a tangle of evidence that no lawyer could hope to break. Together both men raced into the night until they reached Tony Quinn's car.

They drove straight to Quinn's home and into the garage. Butch slipped over to the garden house and used the tunnel. Tony Quinn tapped his way toward the back door. A careful observer might have noticed that his clothes clung to him as though they were soaking wet, but it was dark and there were no prying eyes.

Quinn drew down the shades, entered his lab and fell to work. He carefully laid the gold watches in rows and turned a hot air machine on them until they were thoroughly dry. Then he dusted them with a white powder, applied a glass to his eyes and bent over the objects. He made several notations, opened a drawer and took out a drinking glass, a man's cigarette case, a silver-backed hair brush and another drinking glass; all these the property of the men involved in this case.

AT last he arose and began peeling off his wet clothes. He set Butch to work loading spare automatics while he climbed into a dry set of black clothing.

"You know where Silk is?" Butch asked incredulously.

"I know where Silk is and I know who Zuro is as well. They handed you some pretty rough treatment, Butch. You have my permission to hand that back with interest. We've got to work very fast. Silk's life is in danger now. I want you to make several phone calls and I'll write down exactly what you are to say. Don't argue with the men you call—just give your message and hang up."

The Bat wrote his instructions, handed them to Butch and gave one more order.

"The men you call will gather at a certain address. Contact Carol and have her meet me in the garden house immediately."

Butch didn't use the ladder to reach the tunnel. He merely jumped. The Bat stuffed his guns in place and drew on his hood. He placed his wide brimmed hat over it and donned a topcoat. Two minutes later the night had swallowed him up.

CHAPTER XIX
Five Go Free

ALONG a dark side street, the Bat stopped Carol's car and took Carol's hands between his own.

"We've a difficult job to do, darling. I needed you especially because there are four women you will have to take charge of. Use this car and bring them to their respective homes. Tell them nothing. Are you ready now?"

Carol nodded. They got out and the Bat led the way to their destination. It proved to be a two story building. The Bat knew exactly what to do. So did Carol. She waited quietly in the darkness while the Bat slipped through a window and vanished. Ten minutes later another window opened very quietly and Carol saw a girl of about fourteen being swiftly lowered to the ground.

Carol hurried to her side, watched the rope go up again, and next time it brought down a matronly looking woman who had difficulty in checking the sobs that welled up in her throat when she saw the girl. Two more women were lowered. One of them wore a blank expression, but she remained very quiet. The other placed a protecting arm about her. Carol bustled them off to where the car was parked, helped them in and rolled away.

The girl with the blank stare on her face kept mumbling:

"They said I killed Dick Randall. They said I stabbed him and I believed it. But now I know I didn't, I didn't do it. The influence of that awful man is gone. I'm free."

Carol knew the identities of her four passengers. Mrs. Martin and her daughter Lydia seemed to be affected the greatest. Mrs. Bromley and her daughter hadn't been prisoners so long and had not come into contact with Zuro enough for him to have made a deep impression on their minds.

Carol's heart was singing. These four people were the innocent pawns of a gigantic crime plot. Tony Quinn—the man she had helped create into the Black Bat—had saved them. Those fragments of her father's eyes were proving their worth. He would like to have known that. Somehow, Carol had an idea that he did know.

While Carol drove the four women away, the Bat was busy. He crept along the hallway of the building he had invaded, his eyes piercing the darkness easily. He entered several rooms very quietly and found no trace of what he sought. Finally he made his way into the cellar of the building, grateful for the soft-soled shoes which prevented him from making the slightest sound.

In the cellar he saw a small wine closet.

Something seemed to be moving inside it and his sensitive ears detected the sound of a man's hoarse breathing. The Bat crept forward and the eyes gleaming through the slits of his mask were alive in hope. The wine cellar door was sturdy looking and equipped with a heavy padlock. The Bat spent ten precious minutes getting that open. Then he stepped into the tiny room.

SILK was there—tied to an old bed spring, his limbs spread-eagled at a painful angle. The Bat quickly cut him loose. Silk eased himself into a sitting position.

"I knew you'd come," he said, "They think I'm the Bat. A short time ago Zuro came down here and tested the ropes as if he thought I'd gotten away and then returned. He promised that I'd see one more dawn. Not that it mattered much. I—I killed a man. Murdered a man I didn't even know. They said he was a friend of Alek Laurie, but that is no reason why I should have slashed him to ribbons."

The Bat put a friendly hand on Silk's shoulder. He noticed that part of the disguise Silk had assumed was now torn away.

The Bat's voice became soothing and confident.

"You were hypnotized, Silk. A knife was placed in your hand and you were told to kill someone. You approached the victim with such an order burning in your brain. But you didn't kill him. You did not commit murder anymore than Bromley or Medlin or Hoffman did. They were hypnotized just the same as you were. They accepted the knife because they were powerless to refuse. But, Silk—no matter how cleverly a men is hypnotized, he will never perform an act repugnant to him. He will approach a point to where that act is ready to be fulfilled and then stop. That's exactly what you did."

"But—but that poor fellow was dead. I was covered with his blood. I had the knife," Silk protested.

"After you approached him, the knife was taken from you, used on the victim and you were smeared with blood. Then the knife was placed in your hand again and you were awakened. You had no memory of what happened except, perhaps, the realization that no one but you could possibly have committed the murder. That idea was implanted in your mind to remain there in a post-hypnotic spell. You did not murder anyone, Silk. Think that—hard and often. You'll discover that very soon you'll be as sure you didn't do it as I am now. But how do you feel? There is work to be done."

Silk was eager for it. "If I can get my hands on Zuro, everything will be all right," he vowed. "What can I do?"

The Bat, still talking very softly, gave Silk detailed instructions. Silk grasped the idea, grinned with new hope and followed the Bat out of the building.

CHAPTER XX
The End of Zuro

VICTOR HOFFMAN, propped up in bed, poured himself a portion of scotch and fizzed seltzer into it. He raised the glass to his lips, but the jangle of the phone beside his bed made him jump. He answered it with an ill-natured growl that changed to a gasp of astonishment

"This is the Bat," Hoffman was informed. "Because it is still dangerous for all parties concerned to move about much, I'm having Bromley and Medlin go to the hospital. The case is broken and I'm quite sure I know who Dr. Zuro is. Before morning you'll be safe and free again."

"Thank heavens," Hoffman declared fervently. "I'll be waiting for them."

Medlin arrived first and Hoffman met him in the reception room on the first floor. Medlin was a cantankerous looking man of about sixty. He spoke in a cryptic, annoyed voice.

"What's the meaning of this, anyway? A man, professing to be the Black Bat, phoned me and informed me that it would be to my best interests to come to this sanitarium and see you, Mr. Hoffman. Can you tell me what it's all about?"

Hoffman shrugged. "Charles Bromley is coming,

too. Looks like all three of us are in the same boat. The Bat says that he had some Dr. Zuro practically nailed to the wall."

Medlin seemed to wilt. He sat down heavily, then arose again and hurried to the door. He closed it tightly and returned to face Hoffman.

"By all three of us being in the same boat, you probably mean we're all paying this Zuro blackmail. Maybe for the same reason, too. I—I killed a man—one of my best friends. Zuro—he got me out of the mess and covered up all the clues. What's he got on you?"

Hoffman groaned. "The same thing. I murdered a friend, too. I only wish I knew what devil's urge made me do it. Zuro has practically ruined me."

Charles Bromley, his face drawn with worry, came next. All three men lapsed into silence. Hoffman paced the floor nervously. Medlin and Bromley just sat. Somewhere outside in the corridor a clock's mellow notes sounded four times. Each man shuddered. Was this suspense going to keep on forever?

Then they were suddenly aware of a presence in the room. Barely discernible against the darker reaches of the room stood a figure clad entirely in black. It moved forward until the hood and the wing-like cape of the Black Bat revealed his identity.

"GENTLEMEN," the Bat said, "I have kept you waiting and I'm sorry. All of you are here because you are victims of Dr. Zuro. I can trace exactly what happened to you. Someone interested you in voodooism. You attended some of the lectures and you wanted to know more of the cult. The next step was an introduction to Zuro. In each case you will recall that Zuro led you on until the time was ripe.

"Then he hypnotized you. You don't know that, but you will recall that at one time Zuro stood over you, looking into your eyes and you became drowsy. After that happened, you discovered that you'd murdered a man. Your business partner, in every case. You had no motive for the crime, but you knew you did it.

"Zuro whisked you away, said he concealed the clues and disposed of the corpse so that the police could never trace the murder to you. Zuro spoke truthfully, then—because you are not guilty of murder, gentlemen. You are victims of hypnotism, in which Zuro excels. You believed you had committed the murder because he wanted you to believe it. He picked on your business partners for a specific reason. With them dead he'd have only each of you to deal with."

Medlin jumped to his feet.

"Then—then we've been paying him for nothing. It was all a trick?"

The Bat sat down on the arm of a chair.

"Quite right. First of all, Zuro needed money—huge sums of it, so he made you pay blackmail in cash. He intended to break you and then buy up your businesses under an alias. Later on, he demanded even greater sacrifices on your part. Bromley—he demanded that you furnish him with automatic rifles and pistols, made in your factory and never numbered.

"You were forced to install some of Zuro's own men to handle this work. Those guns could never be traced. Even the G-Men believed some clever crook had discovered a method of removing the numbers so they could never be brought back. Under Zuro's orders those unnumbered guns were shipped to sporting goods stores all over the nation. Presumably they were purchased by Pierre Aumont and they were, but not of Aumont's free will. He was being forced into this unholy business just as you were."

Bromley mopped his face with a silk handkerchief.

"I knew what was going on," he said. "I read about holdups and crimes where murder was done and the weapon was unregistered. I knew those guns came out of my factory. Aumont's chain of sporting goods stores sold the weapons to the gangs. It was a foolproof scheme."

"Quite right," the Bat agreed. "Zuro has organized crime from one end of the country to the other, picking his men carefully and furnishing them with weapons they could use with impunity. In each of Aumont's stores, Zuro planted one of his agents who handled the gun sales. He saw to it that only the members of the nationally organized ring would be furnished; Zuro was trying to squeeze out all other crooks. Then it was your turn, Mr. Medlin.

"Your jewelry stores all over the country also had a manager or assistant manager installed. Not of your own volition, but with a murder rap over your head and Zuro holding the cards, you couldn't disobey him. So—you substituted his own picked crooks for your honest managers.

"THE holdup men brought their loot to your stores, in each case identifying themselves with a grisly token in the form of a chessman fashioned like a skull. The loot was purchased, transformed into untraceable and saleable goods. Zuro took a cut by selling the guns, cut in on the cash his crooks received for the loot, and then cashed in for the third time by taking the profits of the fencing transaction.

"The rest of your business, Mr. Medlin, was carried on in normal fashion. Your stockholders suffered no loss and no suspicion was ever attached to you or your stores as being the greatest organized group of stolen goods receivers the country has ever known."

Bromley put a cigarette between his lips and forgot to light it.

"What you've explained is the truth. Since you told me it was impossible for me to have committed murder—a load has dropped off my mind. Now I'm sure I didn't do it. But—Zuro can probably prove we did. How can we tell the police what he has done without involving ourselves?"

Victor Hoffman stepped forward. He seemed the coolest of the lot.

"Gentlemen—I've made up my mind. I don't think Zuro can prove any charge of murder against us. I'm going to my room for my hat and coat, and then I'm going to the police. I'll return in one moment."

He ran up the stairs and they heard his heels clicking across the marble floor of the corridor. A moment later they heard a wild yell from upstairs. In a flash the Bat was racing up the steps, gun in hand. He rushed along the corridor, barged into Hoffman's room and stopped in his tracks.

Sprawled on the floor was a man clad in a blue robe. It covered his face, as if it had been pulled up when he had fallen. Hoffman was holding onto the back of his chair and pointing down at the figure. "He—he was like—that when I came in. It's Zuro! Is he—dead?"

The Bat knelt beside the robed figure, picked up a limp wrist and felt no pulse. Then he slowly pulled the robe down to uncover the face. Hoffman cried out in horror. The man in Zuro's robes was Major Botts, the attorney! It was apparent that he hadn't found time to put a disguise on his features. His mouth hung agape, his throat was slightly swollen. The Bat sniffed around his lips, got the odor of whiskey and picked up a glass beside Hoffman's bed.

"A dose of his own medicine," the Bat said slowly. "He must have come here to kill you, Hoffman, but he heard us talking and realized he was done for, and he took the easiest way out."

Hoffman sank back on the bed.

"Just one moment," the Bat said. "Hoffman, you told me that Zuro had taken your last penny. How is it then that you were able to find seventy thousand dollars in cash with which to buy this hospital—and why did you buy it under a false name? It was foolish. Your signature and the deeds would convict you in court."

HOFFMAN arose and stared at the Bat. "Why—why, I felt I had to have some perfectly safe place to hide. So I—I—"

"So you bought the hospital in order to provide an alibi for yourself and a prison for the people you had kidnapped. The hospital was close to your hideouts, which was convenient. You held Mrs. Martin a prisoner after you killed her husband because he was getting too close in his investigation of *your* voodoo ring! You held her so that when the probate court released her husband's estate, you could lay your hands on it. You cowed her by framing her daughter Lydia into a murder charge: the killing of a G-Man she really was in love with. You could make her sign over anything. You snatched Bromley's wife and child to keep him in his place because he was showing signs of kicking over the traces. Those four women are no longer here, Hoffman. They are all at home, safe!"

Bromley emitted a long drawn-out sigh. From somewhere below came hoarse shouts and the sound of a thud and then a body falling heavily. This was repeated several times. Hoffman, still standing near the bed, watched the Bat with eyes as hard as beads.

The Bat laughed curtly.

"Don't stare at me, Zuro. My mind happens to be as strong or even stronger than your will. You can't hypnotize me nor do I think the executioner at the prison will be affected by your eyes. You're all done, Hoffman. You are Zuro! Major Botts here was dominated by you and, being a bit greedy, he actually delighted in bringing you new victims. He reaped his reward. You hoped I'd accept him as Zuro and close the case, but you slipped. Several times in fact.

"Take the incident of your near death. You used 'dumb root' as your poison. It's a product of Haiti and voodoo, so it was a natural. The drug strikes men dumb as it kills them. In each case, your victims were given the drug in a form that would delay its action—a certain dose perhaps, or a soluble capsule. At any rate I know that *no man can possibly recover from the drug.* You did and thereby aroused my suspicions when I figured out the poison. Then, apparently bankrupt, you bought this sanitarium."

There was another series of violent commotions below. Hoffman was beginning to tremble. His eyes now bulged in terror.

"Another item was the manner in which you prevented anyone from identifying you," the Bat went on calmly. "The robe concealed your figure, with padded shoulders to give the illusion of great width. The makeup on your face changed you into Zuro, but you were careful to always keep blue lights on wherever you could because it helped to conceal the disguise. You appeared confident and bold. You never wore gloves, as if you dared anyone to find the fingerprints of Zuro.

"That puzzled me, I'll admit, until I realized the only way you could keep from leaving prints was by covering your fingers with a very thin film of especially prepared collodion. Later on you attacked a man, anesthetized him with ether and

there you made a mistake. The ether dissolved the collodion on your hands and you left enough fingerprints to convince any jury. They matched the ones on the hair brush I took from your house!"

HOFFMAN was swaying slightly as if he were ready to faint. Suddenly he raised his voice in a shout.

"Riga—boys! Grab 'em! Shoot to kill! No man must remain alive!"

There were heavy steps outside the room and then a man appeared near the doorway. Under each massive arm he held an unconscious thug. One of them was Riga. The man who held him was Butch.

"Somebody want something?" Butch, asked happily. "Boy, am I having fun."

Hoffman gave a hoarse sob and suddenly grabbed the glass of whiskey on the table. He raised it to his lips, drained it and flung the glass at the Bat.

"Now let's see you burn me! Let's see you drag me into court! Major Botts didn't take all of the poison. There's enough in me to do the job in one or two minutes. I've fooled you. I've robbed all of you of the pleasure of watching me sentenced to die. Damn all of you! I had you knuckling under, all right—all but the Bat. If he hadn't come into it, I'd have won. I'd have reigned over the biggest criminal syndicate the world has ever known. I'd be the richest man alive and no one would suspect. No one would—"

Hoffman's voice was cut off as abruptly as though a keen knife had slashed across his throat. He raised his hands and the terror of death shone in his eyes. Then, without a sound, he slumped onto the bed, sagged down and rolled to the floor.

The Bat drew a long breath as he faced Medlin and Bromley.

"I hoped he might do that. It would have been difficult to convict him without involving you gentlemen and a lot of other kindly, although susceptible, people. Through his voodoo, Hoffman was in a position to do a great deal of damage. He learned much from his clients. Then, too—I couldn't very well go into court and testify against him and my evidence was quite necessary. In a few moments Lieutenant McGrath of the Police will arrive. You may inform him that Hoffman was Zuro, that his voodoo was a fake, that he forced you to submit to his orders.

"Zuro's men will be here, too, and they'll talk to save their own skins. Within the last hour, gents of the Federal Bureau of Investigation have struck. All over the country, Hoffman's crooks and agents are being rounded up simultaneously. Hoffman actually murdered Hazelton, his business partner, and it was a cold-blooded killing to get Hazelton out of the way and provide Hoffman with added cash. And he was covering himself up by the rest of his scheme when he led you to believe you had also murdered your business partners. Then, if the police ever did close in on his murder of Hazelton, Hoffman could blame it all on the voodoo ring, make sure that evidence of your frame-ups would show up. Thus, putting himself in the same circle, he'd be absolved of Hazelton's murder, too.

"He realized that Felix Martin might get a chance to talk before he could be silenced, and Martin's daughter, acting as a spy in Zuro's household, had seen Hoffman there at some time or other. She reported this to her father, but both of them were sure that Hoffman was a victim of Zuro. Hoffman actually wanted to be suspected as a victim of Zuro. He even planted a death *ouanga* fashioned after his own likeness, hoping it would be found and recognized, thus always giving him an out in the event of trouble."

The Bat paused, then went on.

"I think that's all, gentlemen. You are quite free of Dr. Zuro and his insidious plans. You are not murderers—Hoffman is the killer of your friends. If you will remain here until Lieutenant McGrath arrives, I shall be grateful. You may tell him all the details, including Hoffman's confession."

The Bat stepped into the corridor. Suddenly the lights winked out and a dim shadowy form moved away.

Below, Butch was holding two squirming white-coated men. He drew them apart and then brought their heads together with a thump. He dropped the unconscious forms, rubbed his capable hands and then looked a little sad.

"What," the Bat asked as he surveyed the groaning, half conscious members of Hoffman's mob, "do you call this?"

Butch grinned in high glee. "Blitz—blitz—wait a minute. Don't tell me. Yeah, yeah, *Blitzkraut.* That's it, *Blitzkraut.* Boy, does Carol teach me a lot of new words. But y'know, Boss, them foreigners oughta speak better English! How's for some rest, Boss—at least till the next case?"

"Yes," Tony Quinn said, with a tired smile, "until the next case."

THE END

THE BELFRY by Will Murray

With this our fourth volume, the Black Bat series shifts into a new phase.

The originating author, Norman A. Daniels, had been penning former District Attorney Tony Quinn's adventures in an unbroken string. This is about to change.

Our first novel, *The Black Bat's Crusade*, boasts a cover that echoes an old Shadow pulp cover, *The Crime Master*. It also marks a year since Daniels had written the first entry in the series.

Daniels submitted this latest manuscript in January, 1940. At the time he was also writing the Eagle for *Thrilling Spy Stories*, the odd *Phantom Detective* novel, and had recently taken over the Skipper short stories in the back of *Doc Savage* under the house name of "Wallace Brooker." He was a busy pulpster.

Being busy does not seem to have slowed Daniels down in writing the Black Bat. Daniels had comfortably turned one out approximately every other month. But after doing *The Black Bat's Crusade* in January, the author didn't write another until *The Black Bat's Triumph* in April. There were sound reasons for this.

Over in *Detective Novels*, Daniels had launched a new series in 1939 starring Jerry Wade, the Candid Camera Kid, and for the same magazine he initiated the Crimson Mask stories. Both series comprised novelettes of 20,000 words, as opposed to the average 45,000 word Black Bat novel. In 1940, the two new series began alternating in the pages of *Detective Novels*, and this alone may be the reason Daniels skipped an issue of *Black Book Detective*.

However, in January, Editorial Director Leo J. Margulies called Daniels into his office. Writer George Fielding Eliot, who had been writing the Dan Fowler lead novels in *G-Men*, was moving on to write military articles for the *Herald Tribune*. Daniels agreed to pen one entry. He would go on to write 26 more, although not regularly.

Daniels' first Fowler, *The Convention Murders*, was written around the time Daniels would have been doing his next Black Bat.

All of this frenetic activity indicated what a rising star Norman A. Daniels was becoming as the 1940s dawned. Especially at Thrilling, where Margulies kept a writer busy if he was good. One suspects the success of the Black Bat had something to do with it.

Sometime around February, 1940, a mysterious new writer pens our second selection, *The Black Bat's Flame Trail*. Decades into the future, Daniels was asked about this, and drew a blank. Fortunately, his wife had a better memory. Daniels reported:

> Dorothy recalled better than I, that one day I picked up a new issue of the Black Bat and, on reading it, realized it wasn't mine. I called Leo and he said that he wanted another writer to try writing one to see if he could do it, just in case something should happen to me. So that can probably explain the discrepancy.

This surprise novel was written with the dramatic intensity of *The Spider*'s Norvell Page. But is it Norvell Page? Page definitely produced at least one Black Bat novel in the months to come, but so did others, including Doc Savage's Laurence Donovan.

Another suspect is Fredric Whitney Ellsworth, who back in the 1930s had written the number of Dan Fowler novels in *G-Men*, and a sprinkling of *Phantom Detective* exploits. He went on to become editorial director of DC Comics, overseeing Batman, among other superheroes, and would hire as editors Thrilling's Jack Schiff and Mort Weisinger, who together supervised the development of Batman in the decades to come.

Norvell W. Page circa 1936

Black Bat editor Mort Weisinger

At the time *The Black Bat's Flame Trail* would have been written, Ellsworth joined DC Comics' editorial staff in January 1940, possibly as a result of having refereed the dispute between Standard and DC over the near-simultaneous appearance of Batman and the Black Bat. Let's look at the record, starting with Mort Weisinger, who in an interview conducted in the 1970s recalled giving the writer a Black Bat assignment:

> Whit came from California and knew Leo Margulies. Leo said to me, "Why don't you try Whit on Black Bat?" So I gave him a springboard and he wrote half of it. He brings in the half and I read it. Then he calls me up and asks, "How is it?" I said, "Well, over here this has to be changed...." He cuts me off and says, "Well, stick it up your ass. Forget it." I said, "Wait a minute. I like it! Those are little things. I'm going to take care of it myself. I want you to finish it." I gave him the advance and he started writing for me and he did all Black Bats.

There are problems with this recollection. First, Ellsworth had been writing Dan Fowler long before the Black Bat was conceived. Secondly, there are only three Black Bat novels whose authorship is open to question. For Norman Daniels penned all but seven of them.

It's likely that Weisinger was misremembering. Back in the 1940s, he wrote the following for *Writer's Digest*:

> In 1941 Maj. George Fielding Eliot, who had been writing the G-Man booklengths for us, gave up the assignment for greener pastures.... Ed Churchill was one of the writers who took his place and when Ed went back to his publicity job at Paramount he recommended a friend, Whitney Ellsworth, for the chore. Ellsworth filled the breach admirably for three or four novels, then became editorial director of Superman, Inc., and his side output tapered down to novelets and shorts.

This is almost certainly what transpired. And Weisinger's confusion after so many years is perfectly understandable. As he once commented, "They were completely interchangeable. It's like saying, do you want ham or bacon and eggs? One day I'm on Black Bat and the other I'm on Phantoms. Many of them were rewritten in the office by myself and some of the other editors to get them in shape. But they were damn good plots."

Ellsworth's involvement writing the exploits of crack F.B.I special agent Dan Fowler is otherwise undocumented, but he seems to have written more than four—possibly as many as a dozen all told. At least two *Phantom Detective* novels are also thought to be his work, both dating to 1939.

This does not mean that Whit Ellsworth did not write a Black Bat story, but it may not have been this one.

The Black Bat's Flame Trail is notable in that the writer got almost all of the subordinate characters' names wrong—an amazing feat by itself. Butch O'Leary becomes "Butch O'Brien." Carol Baldwin is renamed Carol Hastings. Kirby "Silk" Norton got the worst of it. He was renamed "Silk Kirby."

Astonishingly, no editor or copyeditor corrected any of these goofs!

Several months in the future, the unknown author of *The Black Bat's Summons* repeats this mistake, although Butch O'Leary alone escaped his former misnamed fate. This would seem to tie *Flame Trail* to *Summons*. The latter story is unmistakably the work of Norvell W. Page. This clearly links the two novels—although one cannot rule out Norvell Page reading *The Black Bat's Flame Trail* and accidentally duplicating the previous author's mistakes.

Moreover, *The Black Bat's Flame Trail* opens up like a classic 1934 *Spider* novel, with the inhabitants of an Italian inner-city tenement facing grave peril. The author milks the pathos much in the way Norvell Page did in his early days writing as "Grant

Whitney Ellsworth

Stockbridge."

In many ways, the Black Bat series was similar to the *Spider*: A disguised black-cloaked hero who brandishes twin .45 automatics and leaves a sinister symbol on his vanquished foes, and who is supported by a small cadre of assistants. It would have been a breeze for Page to adapt his *Spider* writing style to this new series.

One big difference was that while in both series the hero in his civilian identity was on good terms with his city's commissioner of police, in the *Spider*, Commissioner Stanley Kirkpatrick was sworn to bring the outlaw *Spider* to justice, while his counterpart, Commissioner Warner, was secretly supportive of the Black Bat's campaign against crime.

We do know that Page wrote at least one *Phantom Detective* novel, 1938's *Death Glow.*

Standard editor Mort Weisinger once confirmed that Page sometimes moonlighted for the Thrilling house, ghosting *Phantom Detective* novels, among other things:

> Norvell Page wrote some. He'd written *The Spider*, you know. Margulies and I gave him a few assignments. It was very hush-hush. He didn't want to alienate his relationship with Popular Publications. He'd practically come in wearing a mask. He knew he'd get a fast check.

So, until evidence surfaces to the contrary, we must credit *The Black Bat's Flame Trail* to Norvell Wordsworth Page.

Despite its glitches, *The Black Bat's Flame Trail* is one of the outstanding exploits in the series, and the first written by Norvell Page. But not the last. •

Ornaments of Doom!

A series of daring, murderous raids by hunchbacked killers—who loot money and jewels! In each crime some inconsequential trinket plays a very important part. What sinister menace is at work? Watch for

THE BLACK BAT'S TRIUMPH

Complete Book-Length Novel

By G. WAYMAN JONES

•

FEATURED IN THE NEXT ISSUE

THE BLACK BAT'S

A Complete Book-Length Mystery Novel

With a curse, Conal fired at the Black Bat. (Chapter X)

Death Lights Signal Fires of Doom

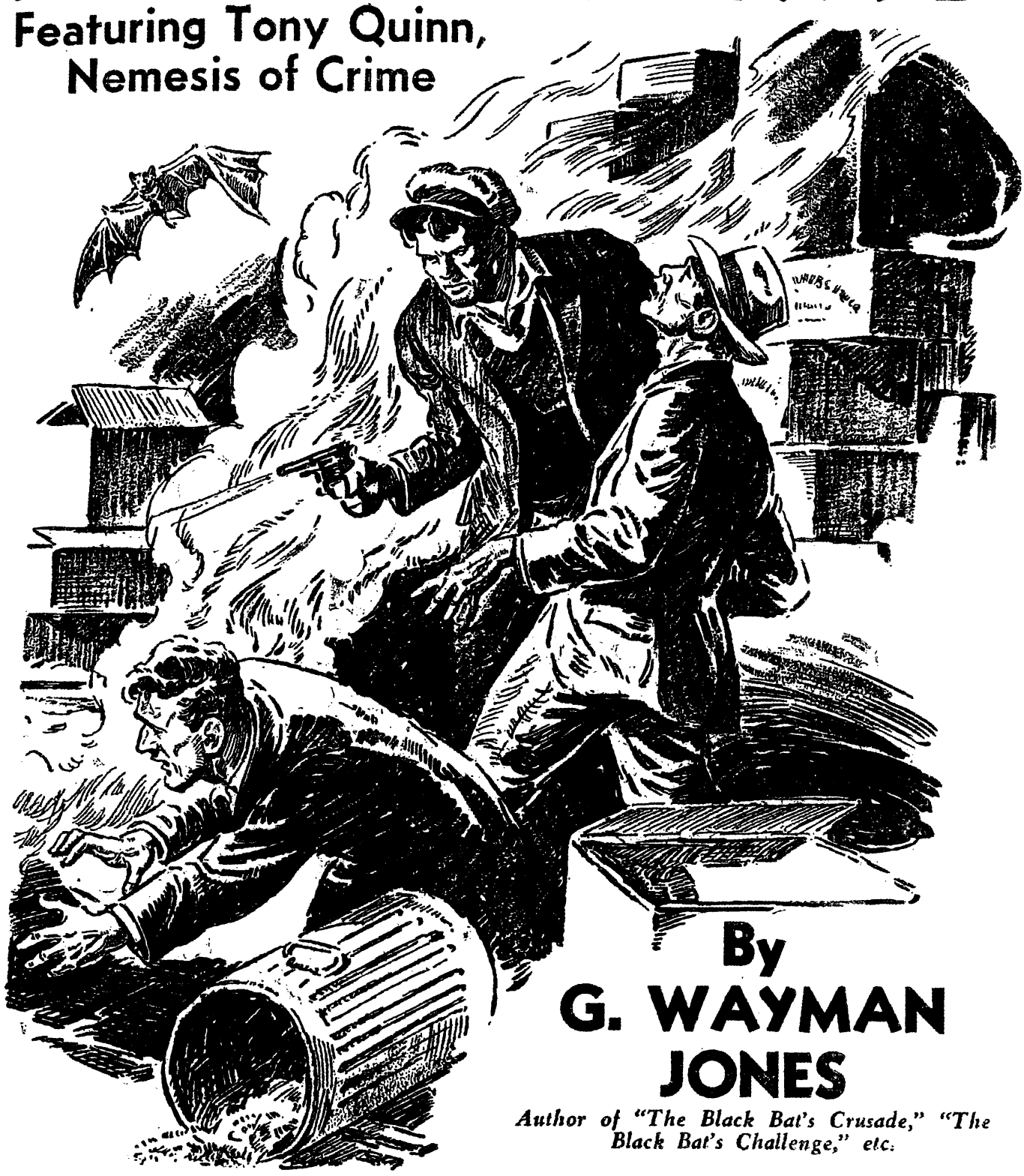
CHAPTER I
Hell Reaches Up

PASQUALE MORELLI considered himself a very lucky man. After months of unemployment, he had got, this day, a job on the construction of the new crosstown elevated highway. It would keep him on a payroll for a long time.

And the newly-rented, three-room flat was a bargain, too, because people were moving into tenements that had already been revamped to conform with the new fire laws. This one hadn't. Well,

FLAME TRAIL

Featuring Tony Quinn, Nemesis of Crime



By
G. WAYMAN JONES

Author of "The Black Bat's Crusade," "The Black Bat's Challenge," etc.

Pasquale would move his little family into one of those other buildings when he got a little money ahead, but right now he was a very lucky man.

The sad thing about it all was the fact that what seemed luck was, in fact, quite the opposite. Pasquale Morelli was doomed to a horrible death—he and his good fat wife and six *bambinos*. The kids were asleep now, filled with good pasta and plenty of meatballs and hard-crusted bread. Rosa, the good fat wife, slept also. But who could blame Pasquale for sitting up a little late to enjoy a glass or two of wine while he congratulated himself on his good fortune?

Summoning the Bat to Blazing Battle!

Tony Quinn Dons His Strange Garb and

When the thing happened, Pasquale had just a moment in which to wonder what was the matter with him. Were his eyes going bad on him? Had he suddenly been taken drunk?

He was facing the door that entered on the kitchen of the fourth floor flat and, suddenly, that door melted before his eyes—melted like a candle! Wood burned, it didn't melt. Even Pasquale Morelli knew that. Yet, this door melted, and a solid wall of flame rolled into the room.

Pasquale's chair crashed over backwards to the floor, and instinct propelled his legs across the kitchen to the rooms beyond, where the seven beings he loved slept peacefully unaware of this strange horror.

But halfway across the room, the rushing flame caught him. He staggered a few steps further, a ghastly human torch, and then melted—melted into the holocaust that had reached up from hell. The devouring tongues of fire swept over him like a wave, eradicating him as quickly and as thoroughly as an ocean comber effaces an image on the sands of a beach. Even his one piercing scream of agony burned to nothingness in his throat.

PATROLMAN O'MALLEY rounded the corner. There had been nothing amiss on Seventy-sixth Street. Of that, he was certain. But as he turned the corner, he heard a *pufff*, like the sound of a huge sail filling with a sudden wind. Frowning, O'Malley paused. His gaze was drawn upward. The sky was bright. Then, he heard the spiteful crackling of flame, and the pungent odor of burning wood assailed his nostrils.

He stepped back around the corner, and his eyes bulged.

Number 847 East Seventy-sixth Street was a seething cauldron of flame! The five-story building writhed and twisted in its death agony. Where less than one minute before had been—by the testimony of O'Malley's own eyes— quietly whole building, was now this hell-hole of horror. No building, even an old wood-lined tenement, could burn so quickly! O'Malley knew that, and yet—

He streaked for the firebox at the far side of the street. His nightstick shattered the glass, and he yanked the hook savagely.

"And come *quick!*" he shouted, as though his voice could carry along the alarm system.

There was no need to go to the police call box—plenty of cruisers would come with the fire apparatus, O'Malley raced toward the burning building.

There were people in that building, trapped. He had to do something to get them out. But he knew in his heart that nothing would come alive from that inferno.

He was wrong about that. He heard, above the roar of the flames, a tight scream. Then a body hurtled through the air before his horrified eyes. It was a live thing when it hurled itself from that fourth-story window, but it thudded sickeningly to the pavement beside O'Malley.

A child!

O'Malley cursed—a bitter curse against whatever it was that could let things like this happen to kids. Then he rushed for the front door of the tenement, his arms shielding his face. No use. The blast of heat hurled him backwards, like the blow of a giant fist. O'Malley sat down, hard. His eyes ran water, and his lungs ached. He coughed until he thought the blood vessels in his neck would burst.

People were running through the streets now, and windows framed questioning faces. Terror-stricken dwellers in nearby buildings began throwing their pathetic belongings from the windows. The Babel of thousands of voices swelled louder than the roaring of the fire.

Apparatus clanged into the narrow street and screeched to hydrants. Rubber-coated men dragged coils of hose from the carts and went to work with the efficiency of machines.

A tower reared itself like a king cobra from a long truck and climbed fifty feet into the air. A hissing stream of water pounded from its high nozzle.

In a matter of seconds, twenty Niagaras converged on their target, but not a man there but knew the effort to save that building was futile. If they could just control it, keep it from spreading to adjacent buildings!

The structures on either side were, luckily, of brick and masonry, Firemen dragged their occupants into the night, and deluged the buildings.

A POLICE riot car sirened its way to the scene. Twenty bluecoats strung lines, pushed back the crowds. Two ambulance orderlies managed to lift the dead child to a stretcher.

Police Commissioner Warner was out of his squad car before the patrolman at the wheel could stop it. Warner found Fire Commissioner Tuthill in the thick of the fight, directing his men by means of a microphone and a loudspeaker mounted on a glistening red car.

Warner tugged at Tuthill's sleeve.

"Bad one, Fred! How'd it start?" The fire commissioner turned a red face to the Police Department head.

"Don't know. Your boy on the beat says it just naturally went *phffft!* Here he is now."

Patrolman O'Malley was staggering toward his boss. His eyelashes and brows were crisped off. His hand went up to the visor of his scorched cap.

"Never mind that," Police Commissioner Warner said, but he was proud, nonetheless, that his men could remember to salute a superior even when they were as distraught as O'Malley apparently was. "What do you know about this blaze, O'Malley?"

O'Malley told him. "... And I swear by all that's holy, Commissioner, the building was okay when I turned that corner! It couldn't have been a minute! And then it was ablaze from top to bottom!"

Warner's brows went up. "Looks as though somebody had the place drenched with kerosene or gasoline," he said to Tuthill.

The Fire Commissioner shook his head.

"I think we'd detect an odor, in that case. Did you smell anything when you passed the place, O'Malley?"

"No, sir. And I'm pretty sure I would have, if there'd been any to smell." He grinned wryly. "I put in a year in the department garage when I first came on the force, and I got to hate the smell of gas!"

Tuthill's mouth set in a firm line. "At any rate, it's arson. Not much question about that! Whoever set this blaze was merciless, diabolical. God grant that the sight of his work may impress him with its horror—and keep him from setting others!"

"Amen!" echoed Warner. But he had scarcely spoken when a fire lieutenant legged up to them.

"Another fire on the West Side, Commissioner!" he said. "A bad one—and it stinks to hell of arson!"

The eyes of Fire Commissioner Tuthill swung to those of Police Commissioner Warner.

"We've a job ahead of us, Warner!" It was dawn before the two widely separated blazes were put under control, before firemen could search through the still smoldering ruins for the charred fragments of human beings who had perished.

The final tally was seventeen dead!

CHAPTER II
Invitation to Peril

TONY QUINN, former crusading district attorney, sat at breakfast, a morning paper propped on a rack before him. His keen eyes glowered at the horrible news printed there.

"Seventeen!" he muttered. "Seventeen lives snuffed out in two fires? It makes a man's fingers fairly itch to get at the throat of the fiend who's responsible, Silk!"

"Yes, sir!"

A grim smile lifted the corners of "Silk" Kirby's mouth. There was something in Tony Quinn's tone that presaged action, and his valet-extraordinary liked action. The former confidence man had had plenty of it since the day he joined forces with the man who was later to become—the Black Bat.

Silk Kirby had been a confidence man for a good many of his lightly carried forty years, but it was his prideful boast that he had never plied his trade against anybody legitimate. His victims were those who had victimized others.

And then, in a lean period, he had attempted his lone burglary. Chance led him to the house of Tony Quinn, then prosecuting attorney. Silk was not the only intruder in Quinn's house that night. The other was a hood sent to murder the district attorney while he slept.

Silk had been instrumental in saving Quinn's life, and there had sprung up between the two men one of those odd, deep friendships that go far beyond the normal association of employer and employee.

Now, as Silk poured fresh coffee into Tony Quinn's cup, there was a sharp stab of the doorbell. Instantly, Silk whisked newspaper and rack from the table. A cloud seemed to pass over Quinn's eyes, remaining there to blunt their keenness to a dead stare. And as Silk moved toward the door, Quinn got to his feet and reached for the rubberfer-ruled cane which was always close at hand while he was at home.

When the front door opened to reveal Commissioner Warner and Lieutenant McGrath, Tony Quinn's eyes stared bleakly over their shoulders.

"Commissioner Warner and Lieutenant McGrath," announced Silk, without the slightest facial indication of the humor which this situation always engendered within him.

Quinn's face wrinkled into a smile of welcome. The deep scars around his eyes tightened.

"Hello, Warner. Hello, Lieutenant. Come in, come in?"

He turned, and tripped over a chair. Warner caught him.

"Thanks, Commissioner. Clumsy of me!"

McGrath stared at Quinn, frowning. Sometimes he'd be willing to swear that Quinn could see as well as, if not better, than the next fellow. And then he'd take one of these near-headers!

Warner was upset. "Tony," he said, "have you seen the morning papers?" Then he caught himself. "I—I'm sorry, old man. I forgot."

Tony Quinn interrupted him. "That I was blind? No need to apologize, Commissioner. When one's been blind as long as I have, he gets over being sensitive about it. But I'll answer your question. Yes, I've 'seen' the papers—through Silk's eyes. Horrible!" His fists clenched at his sides, and the cords in his neck stood out. "It's at times like this that I feel my handicap most greatly!"

Commissioner Warner laid a hard hand on Quinn's shoulder.

"I understand, Tony."

McGRATH was still looking quizzically at the former district attorney.

"I've been thinking," he said, "this is just the sort of thing that might interest—the Black Bat!"

If he was trying to wring some sign from the face of Tony Quinn, McGrath was disappointed. Quinn's granite countenance was immobile.

"I'm getting pretty sick of you, McGrath!" exploded the commissioner. "When are you going to get it through your thick skull that there can be no possible connection between Tony Quinn and the Black Bat?"

"Sorry," murmured the Lieutenant.

"It's quite all right," said Quinn. "As a matter of fact, I consider the lieutenant's suspicions quite an honor. The idea of being the Black Bat myself is a romantic one. I only wish it were true! But I don't suppose you gentlemen have come to chat about the Black Bat."

"No," admitted Warner, "we haven't, though I wouldn't mind seeing him go to work on the perpetrator of last night's crimes. As police commissioner, I have no real right to say that, because the Black Bat, for all his success in hunting down enemies of society, uses extra-legal methods. I'd have to arrest him if I ever had the opportunity."

Again Tony Quinn smiled. "And with you and Lieutenant McGrath on the job, Commissioner, the Black Bat has more to fear from the law than from its enemies!"

Warner took a cigar from his vest pocket, and bit the end of it savagely.

"When you were district attorney," he said, "you conducted an inquiry into the incomes of various leading citizens of this city."

Quinn nodded. "Yes, Commissioner?"

"That inquiry," Warner went on, "supplied you with evidence enough to indict and convict several so-called pillars of society who were plundering the city on municipal contracts and things of that sort. If I remember correctly, Amos Willard was one of the men you investigated but did not indict."

"True," said Quinn. "Amos Willard was one of my father's closest friends, but his income seemed to merit investigation anyway. I was happy to find that he was absolutely and unquestionably honest,"

"You're quite sure of that?"

Quinn drew himself up to his full six feet two.

"I think you know me well enough, Commissioner, to realize that no personal feelings could possibly enter into—"

"Of course, Tony," Warner said. "I'm sorry. But the hell of it is that Amos Willard seems up to his neck in this arson."

"You're joking!"

"Unfortunately, I'm not. He was the owner of both the tenement properties that burned last night. They were fully insured, and Willard stands to collect an amount far in excess of their actual value in the depressed real estate market of today."

Tony Quinn's hand fumbled behind him for a chair. He sank into it.

"I'm willing to wager my life on the fact of Willard's honesty! It's incredible!"

"Wait'll you see the next editions of the newspapers," advised McGrath. "The early sheets didn't have time to get the whole story, but when they find the same man owns both those buildings, they'll go to town!"

"Trial by newspapers!" snorted Quinn. "There's too much of that sort of thing! Commissioner, you've come here for my opinion of Amos Willard. My opinion is that he cannot possibly be guilty of such a crime. He's not a young man, nor is he well. I hope you're not going to allow yourselves to be stampeded by a yellow press into arresting him until and unless you have some evidence pointing definitely to his possible guilt."

COMMISSIONER WARNER sounded worried.

"It's easy to say that, Tony, but it's the constant cross of the Police Department to have to listen to the promptings of the press and the public opinion that the press stirs up. But I give you my word that we won't arrest Willard until we have to."

Lieutenant McGrath had strolled to the windows. The shades were drawn against the bright sunlight and McGrath fiddled, apparently idly, with one of those shades. Suddenly, it shot upward on its roller. A bright shaft of piercing light struck Tony Quinn full in the face. Again McGrath was disappointed, for there was no reaction in the eyes of the former D.A. They gazed unblinking into the light.

"Hell!" muttered McGrath.

"What was that?" asked Quinn mildly. "Sounded like a shade going up in a hurry."

Commissioner Warner was angry. "It was

McGrath making a damned fool of himself again! One of these days, McGrath, I'm going to put you back in uniform and on a beat!"

Quinn saw the two to the door, feeling his way carefully before him with the tip of his cane. At the door he reached forth and fumbled for McGrath's hands.

"Goodbye, Commissioner," he said warmly.

McGrath dropped the hand as though it were red hot.

"I'm not the commissioner!" he exploded.

"Sorry," said Quinn. "One of the curses of being blind is that one is forever making embarrassing errors."

The policemen left and Quinn retraced his steps toward the living room. Silk Kirby was already lowering the shade.

"You heard?" asked Quinn.

"Yes, sir." Silk was grinning.

Tony Quinn tossed his cane onto a chair, and rubbed his eyes.

"McGrath almost got me that time, the suspicious rascal. That sunlight hurt plenty! But what do you think of the setup, Silk?"

Silk shrugged. "I don't know Amos Willard, of course, but sometimes even the most upright of men turn crooked."

"And vice versa, eh?"

Silk winced, grinning ruefully.

"Yes, sir. But to turn to matters slightly less personal, it struck me that Commissioner Warner was handing you a veiled invitation to get into the thing. Of course, he's always suspected, just as McGrath does, that you're the Black Bat."

Quinn downed his coffee.

"Well, Silk, the Black Bat is not one to refuse invitations, however informal they may be."

He strode to the fireplace, reached up beneath the brick front, and depressed a hidden spring. The unit swung easily forward on well-oiled hinges, revealing a small room completely fitted as a crime laboratory. Here, too, hung the habiliments of the Black Bat, and a rack supporting a collection of lethal weapons.

QUINN slipped out of the light gray suit he was wearing, and donned one of somber black. A wide-brimmed black hat, pulled well down, concealed as well as possible the frightful scars around his eyes. He slipped twin .45 automatics into holsters beneath right and left arms.

"Just for luck," he said. "I don't expect to need guns."

"You're calling on Amos Willard, I suppose?"

Quinn nodded. "And don't look so out of things, Silk. There'll be action enough for all of us before this thing's over, or I'm greatly mistaken. No ordinary firebug set two blazes simultaneously miles apart."

Quinn bent, and a cleverly concealed trapdoor swung up from the floor at his touch. An iron-runged ladder led downward into a gloomy tunnel. Quinn stepped into it.

Silk brushed dust from the shoulders of his chief's coat. "You haven't worn it for some time, sir," he said.

Quinn disappeared into the darkness, and the trapdoor closed noiselessly.

The Black Bat walked again!

CHAPTER III

The Black Bat vs. the Law

A LONG low tunnel was the Black Bat's course to another exit in a small gate house at the rear of his estate. This gate house faced a quiet street and, having peered cautiously out to make certain that no passersby observed him, the Black Bat entered into the street.

Further down, a small black coupé of a popular and inconspicuous make stood at the curb. Innocent enough in appearance, the coupé had a suped-up motor beneath its shabby hood, which was capable of propelling the car at better than one hundred and ten miles per hour. The Black Bat slipped behind the wheel and stepped on the starter.

He drove carefully and slowly through the city, the brim of his hat pulled far over his eyes. There was scarcely a policeman on the force who did not know Tony Quinn by sight, and everyone of them thought him to be blind.

They knew that acid hurled into his eyes by a desperate criminal in a spectacular courtroom fracas had burned all hope of sight from Quinn's eyes. They knew that horrible months of blackout had tested the courage of the former district attorney while he journeyed to the far corners of the Earth in search of a specialist who might give him some hope of seeing again. And they knew that the quest had been fruitless.

What they did *not* know was that new sight had been given Quinn by an obscure Midwestern doctor through the agency of a girl, Carol Hastings. It was her father, dying of wounds inflicted by gangdom, who had bequeathed his eyes to Tony Quinn. In return, he had extracted a promise that Quinn would use his regenerated sight in the endless struggle against the underworld.

Quinn had given that promise gladly, and had been keeping it ever since—the Black Bat, extra-legal Nemesis of crime!

The mask of supposed blindness had been a valuable asset to the Black Bat. Nobody would

believe that Tony Quinn, deprived of his sight, could be anything more than an object of pity, and that suited Quinn to a T. It made possible his acquired role of the Black Bat and gave him freedom to pursue his relentless offensive against the hordes of evil.

Ten minutes later, he had, threaded his way into the fashionable neighborhood where the apartment of Amos Willard stood. And in front of the building itself, a crowd gathered, a crowd which grew as the minutes passed. The Black Bat could see fists waving in the air, and there were angry shouts from the crowd.

"Murderer!"

"We want Willard! We'll show him justice!"

A cordon of policemen held the crowd from the entrance of the building. There was no mistaking the temper of that mob. Incensed by the tragedy of the night before, they were ready to lynch the likeliest suspect.

The Black Bat guided his car down a side street and stopped. There were, he could see, two patrolmen guarding the service entrance to the building. There would be small chance of slipping past them.

He opened a secret compartment beneath the seat of the coupé, and from it he took a small, almost-round object. He slipped it into the pocket of his jacket. Then he climbed from the car and walked toward the front of the building.

The crowd and the policemen were more interested in each other than in a tall man in black with a wide-brimmed black hat drawn down over his eyes.

He drew the round object from his pocket and flicked a small lever which fitted flush to its surface. Then he bent and rolled the object slowly toward the mass of people.

PRESENTLY a wisp of smoke appeared, and then a veritable cloud. It rolled in thick billows. There were cries of alarm. And then happened what the Black Bat had expected to happen. A cop blew a shrill blast to his whistle, apparently suspecting that this was some trick on the part of the mob to gain entrance to the beleaguered building.

And that whistle blast drew the two patrolmen on the run from their post at the service entrance. They whipped around the corner and passed so close to the Black Bat that one brushed against him.

He slipped around the corner as quickly and as silently as a shadow. A moment later, he was through the rear entrance. In the thick gloom of the in-tea-lot he paused, briefly. From beneath his coat he produced a hood which, slipped over his head, hid the scars and features of his face. A light, oddly-cut cloak he fastened to his shoulders.

And then, moving forward again, he presented the appearance of that nocturnal creature from which he had taken his sobriquet—the Black Bat.

Rubbish and ashcans littered the floor, but the Black Bat stepped easily over all obstacles as though he were capable of seeing as well in the dark as the average man could see in broad daylight.

And, indeed, he was capable of just that! Through the magic skill of the surgeon's fingers, a miracle had been wrought. Subtle alterations in the corneas and lenses of the transplanted optics had given them the quality of being able to pierce the shrouds of darkness.

The service elevator, an automatic affair, was close at hand. The Black Bat entered the small car and pressed the button for the roof, where the penthouse apartment of Amos Willard was situated. As Tony Quinn, the Black Bat had visited there many times in the past.

The car moved steadily and noiselessly upward, but the Black Bat was tense. When the car reached its destination, the door would open automatically. The Black Bat held his finger on the button which would send it down again. The precaution was a lucky one. The car glided to rest, and as the door opened, the Black Bat could see the broad back of another policeman pacing the corridor!

The Black Bat stopped the elevator at the floor below. He stepped cautiously into the corridor and moved silently, on rubber-soled shoes, to a window. Properly speaking, this was the top floor of the building, for the penthouse above was built onto the roof.

Glancing covertly from the window, the Black Bat observed that there was a ledge and, further along the wall, an outcropping of bricks that might serve as a ladder.

There was great risk attached to such a venture. Not only was there the considerable danger attached to a slip, which would tumble him to a horrible death on the pavement below, but the risk of being seen.

It was the latter danger which gave the Black Bat more pause. But, he reasoned, every interested person in the neighborhood would be in front of the building, where the crowd and the action were to be found. The Black Bat stepped out upon the ledge, with eight stories of space yawning beneath him.

HIS fingers gripped the outcropping of bricks. Halfway up, his fingers slipped, clawing at the masonry, and for one awful moment it seemed that he must hurtle down to destruction. Sweat beaded on his forehead and his muscles ached as he clung grimly to the sheer wall. Then, at last, he pulled himself to the open roof.

A swift glance satisfied him that the roof was

deserted. The penthouse reared itself clumsily. The Black Bat moved toward a window. It was locked, and the shade drawn.

"The old man must be plenty scared!" the Black Bat told himself. The shouts of the crowd floated up from the street. "Can't say I blame him," he added.

The Black Bat took a small tool from his belt and inserted it between the two sections of the window. A deft twist of his wrist, and the lock slipped free. The window went up without a sound. He stepped through, his keen eyes probing the room beyond.

But there was no one in this room. The Black Bat moved to the door, listened with his ear against the closed panel. No sound came through. His hand turned the knob, but the door did not yield.

The third key he tried fitted the lock, and the door opened. Across the room, Amos Willard sat before his desk, his head cradled in his arms on the polished mahogany. Protruding from under his arms was a copy of a newspaper with glaring headlines, accusing Willard of arson.

There was something so unnaturally natural about Willard's pose that the Black Bat was instantly apprehensive. He was across the room in a single stride, his hand closing over the old man's shoulder.

Willard came upright easily enough, and then slumped down into the chair, his head rolling from side to side. His eyes, open and glazed, stared at the Black Bat. From just left of the center of his chest protruded the hilt of a paper knife, and his shirt front was scarlet.

It was suicide, beyond question. Amos Willard had placed the knife against his chest, its hilt propped on the desk, and had fallen forward on it, in the manner of the ancient Romans. The old man, apparently completely unnerved by the horrible accusations hurled against him, had taken what seemed the easiest way out.

Could it be possible, the Black Bat wondered, that Amos Willard actually had been mixed up in the arsons? Perhaps he had killed himself in horror at his own guilt. Yet, knowing Willard, the Black Bat doubted it. No, Willard's death was simply another to be added to the list of seventeen, and all the murders lay at the door of—whom? The Black Bat meant to find the answer to that riddle.

The Black Bat's eyes swept swiftly over the room. Opposite the desk was a fireplace, and above it a picture which hung in an incredibly straight position. To this picture, the Black Bat strode. As he had suspected, it was hinged, and swung outward to reveal a small but well-constructed wall safe.

FROM his belt the Black Bat drew an instrument which resembled a doctor's stethoscope. A tiny battery fitted within this instrument gave it great sensitivity. One end of it he placed upon the door of the safe, just left of the dial. Then his long fingers turned the dial with extreme caution until a faint click conveyed to his ear the information that the lock's first tumbler had fallen.

He repeated this procedure a number of times, reversing the direction after each *click.*

The safe yielded. The Black Bat scanned its contents industriously. A few items of jewelry and a considerable quantity of currency he ignored completely, concentrating upon letters and papers which might yield some clue. He exhibited particular interest in a small book which the dead man had apparently kept as a sort of informal record of his multifarious deals in business and real estate.

The entries were too numerous to be examined hurriedly, so the Black Bat slipped the book into the inside breast pocket of his coat. Then he closed the safe, locked it, and rubbed the dial with a clean linen handkerchief.

Again the Black Bat gazed pityingly upon the corpse of his father's friend. But now, Amos Willard was beyond human help, and every second the Black Bat lingered here, added to his own peril. At any moment, somebody might enter the apartment.

Swiftly, he retraced his steps, locking both door and window after him, leaving everything as he had found it. He was particularly careful about fingerprints.

Again, he swung over the parapet and dug his toes into the brick ladder, climbing dizzily downward. Unobserved by any eye on his upward journey, he was not so lucky now. From a window across the street, a wheelchair patient saw the black apparition. For a moment the man could not credit his eyes. Then he wheeled his chair to a telephone and called Police Headquarters.

The man in the wheelchair was pretty excited. He had read newspaper accounts of the exploits of the Black Bat, And he knew a certain lieutenant named McGrath had a great desire to unmask the Black Bat, and the man in the wheelchair was curious himself.

Finally, he got McGrath on the wire and told him what he had seen.

"What!" exploded McGrath, and hung up without bothering to thank his informer.

McGrath barked orders. "Get every radio car in that district converging on Amos Willard's apartment!"

"Yes, sir! And do you want a squad car to take you there yourself?"

"You're damned right I want a squad car! But I'm not going there! I've got another idea!"

A wild light of triumph gleamed in the eyes of Lieutenant McGrath.

CHAPTER IV
And Deadly Peril

REACHING the ledge and the window of the floor below, the Black Bat slipped to comparative safety. The elevator was where he had left it. Again in the dark basement, the Black Bat glided toward the door. Rounding the angle of a wall, the light frame of the exit loomed before him, and framed within it were the figures of the two police guards!

From afar came the whining note of a siren, then another. The Black Bat divined the reason for their approach. He had been seen, and an alarm sounded. Soon, the place would be swarming with bluecoats.

There was no time now to seek another avenue of escape. The Black Bat's hands reached for the twin automatics which nestled beneath his armpits. Wraithlike, he glided forward, and hard steel prodded the backs of the officers.

The Black Bat's voice was as cold and hard as the guns he held.

"Step backward, please!"

The deadly tone forced obedience from the guards. They stepped backward into the gloom. The eyes of one angled back over his shoulder to the dim figure in hood and cape.

"The Black Bat!" he cried.

Electrified, the other patrolman whirled, lunging at the dark figure. The masked man could not shoot. Had these been gangsters, his fingers would have closed without compunction upon the triggers of his guns, but policemen—

His right arm swung in an upward arc, and the steel barrel of his pistol crashed against the jaw of the nearest patrolman. The man crumpled to the floor. The other was clawing desperately for his own gun, but the Black Bat was upon him like a whirlwind of fury. Again his arm swung, and the clubbed gun thudded against the policeman's skull. There was a sharp crack, and the man slid down beside his fellow.

The dark figure bent swiftly. His fingers danced lightly over the heads of his victims and felt for the pulse in the two throats. He sighed with relief. Both men, though unconscious, were not badly injured.

His fingers touched the forehead of each in a last gesture—and came away leaving a mark on each—a small black sticker in the form of a bat, with wings outstretched. The calling card of the Black Bat!

Swiftly now, his hands ripped the hood from his head and the cloak from his shoulders. They disappeared beneath his coat. The man who presently emerged from that door was simply a tall man in somber black garb, with a black slouch hat pulled down over his eyes.

But the screaming of sirens was closer now. The Black Bat crossed the street to the waiting coupé, slammed his foot down on the starter. The Black Bat threw his car into gear. He had to get back to his home in a hurry!

The Black Bat suspected that Tony Quinn would be having a visitor, and Tony Quinn had better be there to greet him!

Ten minutes later, he was in his own neighborhood. His route took him down the street on which his house faced, and his heart sank as he saw a police squad car drawn up at the door. McGrath had beaten him home!

BUT who was that on the sidewalk? The figure of a girl, lying prone. And a large man, evidently extremely annoyed, who bent over her. The Black Bat grinned. There was more than one way to kill a cat—or delay a policeman!

The Black Bat's car turned two corners and stopped. The man in black slid out and walked swiftly down the street. At the gate house of Tony Quinn's estate, he paused long enough to glance up and down the street, then disappeared.

He sped through the tunnel. Before the trap door had settled behind him, the Black Bat was peeling off his black garments and exchanging them for the lighter gray. A touch of his finger released the spring, and the fireplace swung open before him.

He could hear excited voices in the entry-hall. The voice of Silk Kirby, and the voice of Lieutenant McGrath.

"You can call a doctor for this dame whenever you get a chance," McGrath was saying, "but right now I want to see Tony Quinn, I tell you!"

And Silk's conciliatory but firm answer, "I'm sorry, Lieutenant, but Mr. Quinn is resting. He left word not to be disturbed. And you can see for yourself that this girl needs attention!"

"I don't care about the girl. I want to see Tony Quinn! Let me past or I'll slug you!"

McGRATH'S voice was a bellow of frustration.

Tony Quinn smiled quietly. "Silk! Silk!" he called. "What's all the excitement? Do I hear Lieutenant McGrath?"

McGrath and Silk appeared in the doorway. Quinn's glassy stare went over their heads. McGrath's face was ludicrous. He stared unbelievingly at Tony Quinn.

"Hell!" said McGrath.

"What is it, Lieutenant?" inquired Tony Quinn mildly.

McGrath cleared his throat in embarrassment.

"I was going by and I saw a dame do a nose-dive in front of your house. So I stopped and brought her in. That's all. Mind if I use your phone?"

"Help yourself, Lieutenant."

"There's the young woman of whom the lieutenant spoke, sir," Silk was saying. "She's in the hall. Shall I call a doctor?"

"By all means, Silk, call a doctor. Do we know the young woman?"

"Never saw her in my life, sir," lied Silk glibly.

McGrath slammed down the hook of the telephone. He turned, growling.

"Got away clear, after slugging two of our boys."

"Who?" asked Quinn. "What are you talking about, Lieutenant?"

McGrath stared at Tony Quinn long and hard before he answered.

"I wish I could be sure you don't know what I'm talking about! Well, I'm talking about the Black Bat —and I'd give my hopes of promotion and pension just to get my hands on him for two minutes!"

McGrath went slamming out angrily. And no sooner had he left than the unconscious girl in the hallway made a miraculous recovery. She got to her feet and smiled warmly at Quinn and Silk.

"Good work, Carol!" applauded Quinn, and took her hands in his. "But how did you think of it?"

Carol Hastings shrugged. "I saw your car was missing, and just as I was nearing the door, along came the squad car and McGrath. Well, I thought I'd better try to delay our friend as much as possible. So I staggered up to him and grabbed his lapels and did a fake faint." She spoke dryly. "But McGrath isn't a very chivalrous soul, is he? He didn't care whether I lived or died!"

Quinn laughed. "He had something more important on his one-track mind. He wanted to prove I wasn't at home, that I was prowling around as the Black Bat."

Carol Hastings looked deeply at Tony Quinn, and there was something deep and age-old in her eyes.

"McGrath has set himself a tough task," she said, "if he expects to outwit the Black Bat!"

Carol wanted to know the reason for the Black Bat's return to action.

"I suppose it has something to do with the fires," she said.

"Yes," nodded Quinn, and proceeded to tell her of the suicide of Amos Willard.

Quinn treated Carol as an absolute equal in the dangerous game he played in the role of the Black Bat. She had earned that equality. In many an adventure she had proved as fearless and as capable as any man. And it was she who had sent Tony Quinn to the one man who could give him back his sight, her father. The bond which held them together was stronger than fused steel.

When Quinn had finished, Carol said, "But it doesn't make sense, Tony! Unless Amos Willard really did have the properties burned for the insurance. And if he was capable of that, you'd

hardly expect him to kill himself."

"Exactly," agreed Quinn. "I'm convinced that Willard killed himself only because, being old and not able any longer to cope with things, he couldn't stand the thought of the disgrace that would follow the hurling of those false accusations against him. No, somebody else was responsible for those blazes, and the fact that both buildings belonged to Willard may be purely coincidental.

"The simplest answer, of course, is that the fires were set by a firebug. But the average firebug sets a blaze so he can watch it, and watch the spectacle of fire apparatus fighting the thing. He wouldn't be likely to set two fires when he could watch only one of them."

"If you want to allow for coincidence," Carol offered, "it's just possible that two firebugs set two blazes on the same night."

Tony Quinn nodded. "Coincidence is a thing that can't ever be overlooked, but I'm afraid it had no part in those two fires. You see, the very nature of the fires argues against it. By the evidence of witnesses, those buildings burst completely into flames, apparently spontaneously, and without the use of oil. That isn't the sort of fire that a depraved pyromaniac would set with a pile of refuse and a candle behind a dark staircase."

"Then it's your opinion," said Silk, "that the two fires were the work of one person, or of persons working together. But why, and how, and who? That's what I want to know."

TONY QUINN paced the room.

"Why? For the reason behind all criminal activity —profit. How? By impregnating the buildings with some substance of a horribly destructive nature. I've got an idea about that, which I intend looking into.

Who? That'll be the hardest nut to crack."

For a moment he was thoughtful. "You know," he said, "I believe I'm a wicked person at heart. I tell myself that I hate crime and criminals, but I'm really never so happy as when crime and criminals give me an opportunity to work against them with my lifelong friends!"

"I think I know what you mean, sir," nodded Silk. "You don't want criminals to operate, but if they do—well, you like to smash 'em!"

"That's about it, I guess. But, speaking of friends, what's become of our good friend Butch?"

Silk Kirby snorted. "The redoubtable Mr. O'Brien, sir, has been chafing at inactivity of late, and in spite of the fact that you furnish him with a living, he has taken a job as sparring partner in a local gymnasium and fight club!"

"Well, I suppose Butch needs some outlet for his brawn and energy," said Quinn. "For the present, at least, let him keep his job. In the meantime, Silk, I want you to lose your own identity. I think your character of the professor would do very nicely. It makes you appear so respectable. You, Carol, will be Silk's daughter, or rather the professor's daughter."

Quinn's aides exhibited their lack of comprehension.

"I want you to rent an apartment in a good midtown neighborhood, and let people think you're moneyed folks from the West," Quinn explained.

Carol and Silk did not question Tony Quinn's motives.

It was enough that he had issued an order. Carol rose.

"When you've become the professor," she said to Silk, "you can pick me up at my apartment."

At the door, she paused and there was deep concern in her eyes as she gazed long at Tony Quinn.

"And you, Tony," she said, "what are you going to do?"

"I'm going to read for a while," said Tony Quinn blandly. "Tonight the Black Bat may do a little reconnaissance, but nothing dangerous, my dear Carol, simply a routine matter."

If deadly peril and the danger of sudden death were a routine matter, then Tony Quinn was telling the truth.

CHAPTER V
A Blind Man's Walk

FROM the black coat, which he had worn on his morning's foray, Tony Quinn procured the small book that contained notes on the business dealings of Amos Willard. He settled himself in a deep chair and began to thumb assiduously through its pages.

The writing was in the small, cramped style, characteristic of methodical and grasping persons. There were figures showing the income on various properties, and notes about the disposal of properties which did not yield a sufficient interest on capital invested. And some of the entries were in semi-diary form.

One such entry, under a date somewhat more than a year passed, interested Quinn. It read:

> The new legislation requiring the installation of brick firewalls in existing buildings decreases to a terrible extent the value of some of my tenement properties. God knows, the Depression has lowered their value enough as it is, and now I must sell for what the market offers and reconcile myself to taking a heavy loss.

Subsequent entries showed that Willard had indeed begun the liquidation of his tenement properties, and had lost considerably on each investment.

Then, two months after the entry which had first caught Quinn's eye, came this:

> Have had good offers for tenement properties at 847 East 76th Street and 914 West 86th. In fact, the offers are so good that I am inclined to hold on to the properties. If somebody else wants them, there may be a good reason. I'll wait and see.

Quinn whistled thoughtfully. The two buildings mentioned were the very ones which had burned last night under extremely suspicious circumstances! And somebody had wanted to buy those properties from Amos Willard at prices somewhat above the depressed market.

"But old Amos was cagey," Quinn said to himself. "He had a dog-in-the-manger attitude. He didn't want those buildings until somebody else showed a real interest in them, and then he figured he'd take a gamble and hang onto them. And if he'd sold them, he'd probably be alive today!"

Tony Quinn thumbed his way through the tedious pages of the book. The going was tedious, for nothing of interest showed itself for many pages. At last, however, Quinn paused at an entry made scarcely two months before:

> I have sold mortgages on the 76th and 86th Street properties. The face value of the mortgage in each case is $25,000, but in view of the poor market and the fact that the new legislation makes it necessary to spend considerable money upon the buildings to equip them with brick firewalls before the end of the year, I was forced to sell the mortgages at discounts of forty percent, which brings me only $30,000 for mortgages face-valued at $50,000. Still, in consideration of conditions, I may be lucky to salvage even that amount. If, as I suspect, there is any reason for anybody to want

these buildings, I may yet turn a good profit. Buyer is the Acme Mortgage-Servicing Company.

SWIFTLY Quinn scanned the few remaining pages of the book, and found nothing further. He picked up a telephone book and found the address of the Acme Mortgage-Servicing Company.

The Acme Mortgage-Servicing Company. Was that the answer to the whole affair? Had the two buildings been burned simply for the twenty thousand dollars difference between the face-value and the actual value of those two mortgages? For, naturally, the holder of the mortgages would have first claim against the insurance money. And would this be an end to the entire horrible business of arson for profit?

The Black Bat thought not. That there was some connection between the mortgages and the fires seemed reasonable, but Tony Quinn had an idea that whoever had been responsible for the deaths of seventeen persons would not be satisfied with a comparatively paltry twenty thousand dollars.

Quinn itched to get into the offices of the company, to see if the records would yield him any further information. But he knew that to go there during business hours and to ask for information would be pointless. He must wait until night.

In the meantime, a long afternoon of inactivity stretched before him. He decided to go for a walk. It was well for blind Tony Quinn to be seen picking his way through the streets on a daily constitutional. It served to allay any suspicions in the minds of certain individuals concerning the *bona fide* quality of his affliction.

Quinn called his intentions up the stairs to Silk Kirby who was busily engaged in making the necessary physical and facial alterations to transform him into Professor Kelton.

Quinn slipped a pair of dark glasses over his eyes, and took up the rubber-tipped cane. Opening the front door, he picked his way carefully down the steps. He smiled mentally at a too-innocently loitering man on the far side of the street. The man had plainclothesman written all over him. Apparently, Lieutenant McGrath was interested in knowing all about the comings and goings of the former district attorney.

The man now strolled languidly across the street and took up a position in the center of the sidewalk, directly in the path of the man with the cane. Quinn minced stolidly forward, tap-tapping before him with the cane. And he walked straight into the detective!

There were apologies on both sides. But Quinn felt that he had made an impression on the other. His heel had come down heavily on the plainclothesman's toes!

Slowly, Quinn proceeded. He walked several blocks, finally pausing as though confused on the curb of a busy thoroughfare. The detective was not many paces behind him.

A gentle band took Quinn's elbow, and a kindly voice said:

"Can't I help you across?"

"Thank you," bowed Tony.

They started across the street. The man who guided Quinn was a dignified elderly gentleman in pince-nez glasses and rich, though somewhat dated, attire. As they reached the far curb, the old gentleman leaned toward him.

"Here we are, Mr. Black Bat!" he murmured.

Tony Quinn's face did not alter its expression, nor did his bleak eyes shift. But his heart lurched within him. Then he breathed a silent sigh.

"Silk, you rascal! Are you trying to scare inc to death?" he said, without moving his lips.

THE professor chuckled silently. "Had you fooled at that, didn't I?"

And before Quinn could answer, Silk drifted down the street.

A black sedan swung the corner. A blue-jowled man on the right side of the front seat nudged the driver of the car. "Look! Ain't that Tony Quinn, the ex-D.A.?"

"The guy with the cheaters—the blind guy? Yeah, that's Quinn! Wish yuh'd pointed him out while he was crossin' the street. I'd like to give him a little prod with the fender! He sent me up on a tough rap five years ago, and I wouldn't mind settling the score!"

"Yeah!" agreed the other. "But what the hell! He got what was comin' to him anyway when Snade blinded him. There ain't any need to worry about Quinn anymore

"I ain't worryin' about Quinn," the driver said. "The guy I'm worryin' about is the Black Bat! The papers said he left his sticker on them two cops at Willard's place, an' yuh know what that means, don't yuh?"

The blue-jowled man grinned.

"Sure. It means the Black Bat is stickin' his nose in. But the boss is too smart for him. We got nothin' to worry about."

"'I ain't so sure," argued the driver. "We do just so many jobs like them two last night, an' the Black Bat'll be goin' to town. An' when he starts goin', so do I—but right in the opposite direction!"

The man in the back seat spoke for the first time. His voice had a strong nasal quality due, probably, to the fact that his nose was completely flattened.

"Shut up," he said. "What's the matter with you two hombres, anyway? You see a blind guy that used to be a D.A., and all of a sudden you start

gettin' your wind up about the Black Bat! It don't make sense! They ain't any connection!"

The man with the flat nose would have been very surprised indeed to know that Tony Quinn, blind former district attorney, and the Black Bat were the same person!

CHAPTER VI
Fearless Butch

OFFICE boy Tommy Ahern, of the Acme Mortgage-Servicing Company, was feeling pretty good. He'd been trying for a long time to date Helen, the stenographer. And she finally said yes, she'd let him take her out to dinner. Tonight! He'd take her to a place where they had a good table d'hote for a buck, and a pretty fair orchestra.

The drinks would be extra. And then maybe he'd take her home in a cab, and if she'd warmed up a bit with the drinks, maybe she wouldn't mind a little necking.

That was going to run into dough: dinners, drinks, cabs. But it'd be worth it. Helen was a swell number. And what the heck, there was always another payday coming along.

Tommy and Helen said good night to Mr. Hall, and went out. Hall locked the door after them, and repaired to his private office. He dialed a number on the telephone.

Apparently, Hall recognized the voice that answered at the other end of the line.

"Hello, Boss," he said. "This is Hall. Thought I'd better let you know that I had a visit from a flat-foot named McGrath. Yes, he thought there might be something in the fact that the mortgages on both those buildings were bought through this office. Sure, I convinced him that it was just chance. After all, we do a big business in this part of town. The mortgage on almost any building might be serviced through this office."

A throaty chuckle came over the wire. It was a chuckle of amusement, yet it somehow sent a chill down Hall's spine. There was something indefinably cold about it—cold and malignant and cruel. And Hall knew that its owner matched the voice.

"This racket is waterproof, Hall," the voice said. "Waterproof and cop-proof. Relax."

Hall replaced the instrument in its cradle. Thoughtfully he opened a drawer of his desk and produced a bottle and a small glass. His hand shook as he poured, and some of the liquor spilled over onto the polished surface of the desk. Hall mopped it up with his handkerchief, cursing softly. Was there any need for his hand to shake just because somebody called the Black Bat had left a couple of stickers on the foreheads of a couple of cops?

Hall chased the drink with another. His hand was steadier now. He even managed a snort of contempt for the legendary nocturnal creature whose very existence struck terror into the underworld. He took his coat and hat and left the office, locking the door after him.

TONY QUINN finished off a lonely but tasty meal in the shining kitchen of his home. The late afternoon sun could not penetrate the drawn blinds, and Quinn found it necessary to switch on a light.

For a few minutes he stood at the sink, his arms plunged to the elbows in sudsy water. Then, suddenly, he laughed until the tears ran from his eyes. There was something ludicrous about the idea of the Black Bat washing dishes, attired in a muslin apron! He wondered what some of his friends—or enemies—would say if they could see him now.

"Man's work is from sun to sun, but Woman's work is never done!" he recited—and dropped a priceless porcelain serving dish. By the time he had swept up the pieces he had made a mental resolution to leave his dirty dishes in the sink henceforward.

Quinn proceeded then to the living room, which was by now in total darkness. He lifted a corner of a blind and peered out. Sure enough, the lonely plainclothesman still kept his vigil on the far side of the street.

"I might at least have invited the poor buzzard in for dinner," Tony told himself.

He called a number. Presently a gruff voice answered.

"Hello, Butch," said Quinn. "I hope you didn't start swinging when the bell rang!"

Butch O'Brien's voice was hurt.

"Aw, cut it out, willya, Quinn? I ain't punch drunk, not yet anyway. And you can't blame me for takin' a job as sparring partner if you don't give me enough to keep me busy!"

"I'm not blaming you, Butch," Quinn hastened to say. "But if you're not too tired, could you come over?"

Butch's voice was all eagerness.

"Sure, sure! It there something stirring, Tony?"

"I'll tell you all about it when you get here," Quinn promised. "Use the gate house entrance."

"Okay," said Butch. "But look, turn on the lights in that tunnel, will you? I'm not like you, you know. Last time I came through there in the dark I like to have knocked out my brains!"

"If any," said Quinn, and hung up.

He grinned affectionately. You couldn't help loving that hulk of humanity that called itself Butch O'Brien. And you couldn't really blame Butch for taking that sparring partner job, at that. Butch was the sort of chap who had to be doing something,

who had to be throwing his fists.

If he couldn't keep himself busy smashing the heads of assorted gangsters, he had to find some other equally legitimate outlet for his pugnacious energies. Otherwise he might pick a fight with the first policeman he encountered, merely for the sake of having a little excitement for himself.

BUTCH had first come to the attention of the Black Bat when, in the role of innocent bystander in a bank stickup, he had practically signed his own death warrant by diving at a thug who was about to spray the crowd with a machine gun. The Black Bat had saved his life, and in return for that Butch had contracted to serve with the little band in their private war against crime.

And he was peculiarly suited for such service. A former pugilist of no little ability, he had huge fists that packed the kick of a Missouri mule. His broad face was battered and scarred, and his nose wandered aimlessly. He had practically no neck, his head apparently sitting directly on shoulders which were the despair of manufacturers of ready-made suits.

There may have been some question as to Butch's beauty and mental capacity, but none whatever as to his courage. Butch feared nothing in the world save dinosaurs, and he hardly expected ever to meet one of those.

Quinn depressed the hidden spring in the false fireplace, and entered the little room to the rear. Again, he slipped from his gray house suit, and slipped into the darker garments of the Black Bat. He was adjusting his shoulder holsters when the trapdoor in the floor swung upward.

The broad face of Butch O'Brien appeared, and then his body squeezed into view. His smile was pleasantly anticipatory.

"The black clothes, eh?" he said. "That means action. And, boy, will I be glad to quit that sissy sparring partner stuff for a real scrap. Who do you want me to bend, Quinn?"

Tony laughed. "Not so fast. Butch! You'll get plenty of chance to 'bend' things before we're through, or I'm greatly mistaken, but tonight I just want you to keep an eye on the house."

"Aw, Quinn!" Butch's voice was heavy with disappointment.

"Look, Butch," Tony said patiently, "he can't have everything all at once, you know. I've got to go out, and somebody's got to stay here. Carol or Silk may be calling on the private number, and—"

"Oh, so I'm just a telephone girl!"

Quinn ignored the interruption. "—and it's just possible that our friend McGrath might come busting in here to see if I'm at home."

Butch O'Brien's eyes brightened perceptibly.

"Now you're talking!" he approved. "If McGrath comes here tonight, he'll have to come in a tank to get past me!"

"Even with a tank," said Quinn, "I'd still bet on you!"

He slipped twin automatics into the shoulder holsters beneath the folds of his coat and pulled the wide-brimmed black hat low over the seared scars about his eyes.

"All right now," he said to Butch, "into the living room with you."

Butch stepped from the small room. The fireplace swung shut.

"Good luck, Tony," he said.

Alone, now, Quinn extinguished the lights. His hand patted his belt. The folded cape and hood of the Black Bat were there, ready. He sprung the trapdoor and stepped down into the inky blackness of the tunnel.

A normal man would have had to feel and grope his way through that Stygian gloom, but darkness was no barrier to the strange eyes of the Black Bat.

CHAPTER VII
The Big Boss

BEARING the official insignia of the city, a limousine stopped before an office building at the corner of Fifth Avenue and 51st Street. The man in the back seat was out before the chauffeur could open the door.

As the car pulled away from the curb, the man entered the building. In the lobby, only two elevators still operated. One was for late workers. The other, as its neat neon sign indicated, "for members of the Sky Club exclusively."

Kenneth Weeks entered the latter car.

At the twelfth floor, the car stopped and Weeks got out. Strains of music from an expensive orchestra smote his ears.

Apparently Kenneth Weeks was well known in the Sky Club. A shapely hat check girl in abbreviated skirt came forward to take his things.

"Hello, Mr. Weeks!"

Weeks patted her. "H'lo, Red. Remind me to take you home some night."

Weeks passed on into a low-ceilinged room in which there were tables, an orchestra platform and a dance floor. Eight scantily attired chorus girls were going through a routine in the worst Cuban tradition, while an exotic, dark-haired girl sang and weaved her seductively lissome body in tantalizing gyrations before them.

As Weeks sat down at a table, there was a dark scowl of greeting from the dark-haired girl. His palms went suddenly moist, and his weak mouth grinned loosely back at her.

The number ended and the chorus danced rhythmically off into a dark doorway. Carlotta strode to Weeks' table, swinging her hips as she wove between the obstructions on the way. He half rose as she sat down opposite.

"You weren't here last night!" she said. "Where were you?"

Weeks spread his hands "Don't start that business, Carlotta. I was tired out, had to sleep. You sleep all day, you know, but I have to work!"

"My poor Kenny!" Carlotta reached across the table and patted his cheek. "How is your pretty bridge coming along?"

"It isn't a bridge. It's an elevated highway. And I hate the damned thing!"

"So does Mr. Legs Landers. Soon they will be tearing down his beautiful Sky Club to make room for your pretty bridge!"

"Where's Landers now?" Weeks asked, yawning.

"In his office, I suppose. Shall I call him?"

Carlotta was looking at him with mischief in her eyes.

"God, no!" exclaimed Weeks. "I wouldn't care if I never saw that guy!" He stood up. "I'm going upstairs. Want to come along?"

"Why not? Maybe I'll bring you luck."

Carlotta walked beside him, her supple body close to his own. Weeks' palms dampened again.

Outside the dining room, they paused before a small door. There was an ivory bell button, and Weeks pressed this a certain number of times. There was a click, and the door yielded. They climbed a flight of carpeted stairs. Halfway up, Weeks paused, took Carlotta into his arms hungrily.

Her snaky arms went about his neck, and her flaming red lips, parted slightly over the gleaming whiteness of her teeth, turned up to his. They stood thus for a moment. Then Carlotta's lips broke free, and she whispered passionately.

"Sometimes your eye looks away from me, my Kenny! Your eye—all right! But your lips, if they look away, too, I kill you!"

A CHILL slithered down Weeks' spine. He didn't doubt for a moment that the girl meant what she said.

The floor on which they emerged was fitted as a gambling casino.

The drapes and decorations seemed very expensive.

There were only a few people at the elaborate tables. Weeks drifted to a roulette layout. Carlotta stood beside him. "Give me a hundred," Weeks said to the croupier.

The man slid a stack of yellow chips across the table. No money changed hands, but the dealer made a penciled note on a small pad.

Weeks placed chips on the black, the even, and the center column.

His hands were trembling.

"Double O," announced the dealer.

He swept the chips toward him. In fifteen minutes Weeks' chips were gone.

"Give me another hundred, Joe!"

Another fifteen minutes, and those chips, too, were gone. Weeks requested another stack. "Sorry, Mr. Weeks," said the croupier.

Weeks moved off, grumbling.

"What is this, Kenny?" Carlotta asked. "You cannot get more chips?"

"A new rule of Landers'! No more than two hundred dollars a night! How can I make any money that way?"

"At least you cannot lose so much."

"Wait here," said Weeks. "I'm going to see Landers."

He disappeared through a door at the far end of the room. Beyond this door was a small vestibule, and another door. Weeks rapped, and entered. A sleek man of average physique sat behind a huge desk. He looked up.

"Hello, Weeks."

"Hello, Landers." Weeks stood irresolute for a moment. "I want you to take that lid off, Landers."

Landers smiled. "Your salary as city engineer is seventy-five hundred a year, isn't it, Weeks? Well, anybody knows that a guy earning that salary can't afford to gamble more than two hundred bucks a night! That's your limit unless you've got cash to lay on the line!"

"Why don't you stop worrying?" Weeks demanded. "You saw some dough starting in your direction last night, didn't you? And I've got a patent pending in Washington that'll make us rich—both of us!"

Landers chuckled mirthlessly.

"By the time the Boss gets his cut, there isn't much left for suckers like us! And if you hadn't been such a fool for gambling, we wouldn't have had to cut anybody else in on the thing!"

"You did the cutting in, not me," Weeks said. "We could've worked the whole racket by ourselves. Why did you have to cut this mysterious Boss of yours in at all?"

LANDERS stuck his jaw to within a few inches of Weeks' face.

"All right, baby, you've asked, so I'll tell you! I let you get into the bankroll at this place for fifteen thousand dollars! Don't ask me why, because I don't know. I'm supposed to be smart! Well, the Boss told me to get the dough—or your hide! He also told me that if I didn't get the dough, he'd get my hide, too. D'you know what that means, Weeks?"

Landers' forefinger gave an eloquent imitation of a gun-barrel.

The color had drained from Weeks' face. "D'you mean I'd—I'd have been bumped off?"

"Not only you, but me, too! The Boss doesn't get fooled around with very much. There was another guy once, who ran a joint for the Boss and something went wrong. The guy disappeared. Nobody knows what happened to him, but I do. He's standing in a block of cement at the bottom of the river!"

Weeks sank into a chair.

"My God!"

Landers nodded. "That's right. So, my friend, it's a good thing you came up with the little racket we're working now. Even that almost slipped, and it was nip and tuck for a while again. But now, with this invention of yours, it's running okay. Now, is your hide worth cutting the Boss in on it?"

"Who *is* the guy?" queried Weeks.

Landers spread his hands. "I don't know, and that's the truth. Twice a week, I put the receipts, in cash, into a safety deposit box, together with a report. By the time I go again, the last batch is gone, and whatever instructions there are for me are waiting in that box."

Weeks shook his head. "You're a cagey guy, Landers. It all sounds fishy to me. I've got a hunch you're running the whole racket yourself."

Landers shrugged, smiling.

"For example," Weeks went on, "if you do all your business through a safety deposit box, how could you get in touch with the Boss in a hurry if you happened into a jam?"

Landers motioned Weeks to his side of the desk.

"See this drawer?" He pulled it open. "That telephone is a private wire. It connects with the Boss. Want to talk to him?"

"I wouldn't mind, at that!" Weeks reached for the instrument.

For a moment he heard nothing. Then a voice incredibly hard and cold, almost metallic, grated upon his eardrum.

"Hello?"

The single word was a question, inviting Weeks to state his business. The city engineer experienced a chilling sensation at the base of his spine. He had a sudden, overwhelming desire to put down that phone, to rid himself of that cold, interrogating voice. But he mastered the vague sense of panic, and forced himself to speak.

"This is Weeks," he said, and his voice held a note of bravado. "Apparently you and I are by way of being partners, yet I've never seen you, and I don't know who you are. Wouldn't it be a good idea for us to be a trifle more open and aboveboard with each other?"

"No," said the voice flatly. "When I'm ready to make myself known to you, I'll do so. In the meantime, it would be an excellent idea for you to curb your curiosity. I have sometimes found it necessary to take steps about persons who suffered from an over-abundance of that quality. I hope it won't be necessary in your case, Weeks! Goodbye."

THERE was a definite click. Weeks replaced the instrument upon its cradle. He seemed to be glad to be rid of it—as though he had been holding venomous snake in his moist hand. He faced Landers, frowning very darkly.

"I still can't be sure you're not behind the whole affair, Landers! How do I know you haven't got some thug with a nasty voice sitting at the other end of that phone just to cover up for yourself?"

The door opened. A large, florid man stood with his hand on the knob.

"Oh, I'm sorry. Didn't know you were busy, Landers!" He started to go.

Landers got up. "Don't go, Mr. Morley. We were just talking. Have you met Ken Weeks?"

Morley stuck out a huge paw and gripped the hand of the city engineer.

"Seen him around the place once or twice, I think. I won't keep you for more than a second, Landers. I want to do a little gambling, and I'm not very flush. Can you cash me a check, say for five thousand?"

"I guess so, Mr. Morley, if you'll guarantee to drop a little of it at the tables. But you've been running in pretty good luck lately, haven't you?"

"Not bad," admitted the florid man.

"Nicked you for about seventeen thousand in the last week, I think."

Kenneth Weeks looked enviously at the big man. He knew him by reputation, of course. "Big Jim" Morley was a Wall Street plunger, and a familiar figure in sporting circles. And with all his dough, he was still able to win seventeen thousand dollars in Landers' Sky Club while he, Weeks, couldn't win a bet! It didn't seem fair. And, stealing a glance at Landers, Weeks could see that the club's proprietor was worried about losing that kind of money, too.

Morley was writing out a check, and Landers twirled the dial on the heavy safe in the corner.

"I'll be going. Glad to have met you, Mr. Morley," Weeks said.

He went out. He found Carlotta at the bar, still sipping sherry. She pulled him down on a stool beside her.

"Why are you always drinking sherry?" he asked.

For a brief moment, Carlotta pressed against him.

"Because it makes me love you."

"This is a hell of a place to love me," Weeks said, looking around the peopled room.

"I know, but I have a show to do, right now!"

She got up swiftly, and was gone. Weeks gazed after her. His palms were moist.

Allen Hall, the manager of the Acme Mortgage-Servicing Company, got up from his place further down the bar and moved toward the city engineer. He walked unsteadily. He stopped behind Weeks, swaying slightly. Weeks could smell his heavy alcoholic breath even through his own.

"You're drunk," Weeks said, a contemptuous look on his face.

Hall smiled amiably. "Gambling's your vice, whisky's mine. Makes us even."

"Not quite," said Weeks. "My brain doesn't get foggy. You let anything go wrong in that place of yours, and Landers'll be annoyed."

Hall pondered deeply, "I wonder," he asked himself, "I wonder if I remembered to lock that safe?"

CHAPTER VIII
The Acme Safe

HE peered cautiously from the door of the gate house. The narrow street was deserted. The Black Bat flitted swiftly down the pavement more like a shadow than any creature of flesh and blood.

The small black coupé was at the curb. The Black Bat slid beneath the wheel and jabbed with his foot at the starter. Turning the corner, the Black Bat switched on the lights, though he had no real need of them.

A ten-minute drive brought the Black Bat into a midtown business section which was as deserted as a graveyard at night. He found the building he sought. Driving once around the block he discovered with satisfaction that an alley serviced the rear of the place.

Back on the street which fronted on the building, the Black Bat parked his coupé . A swift glance down the street showed no living thing afoot, though the window of an all-night restaurant glowed brightly against the gray facade of buildings across the way.

A moment later, he was in the alley, moving silently and invisibly toward the rear entrance of the building.

The door, as he had expected, was locked. From his belt he drew a ring holding several ingenious keys. Connected by a thin wire to a small but powerful battery, anyone of these keys need only be of the correct type to slide into a lock. A magnetic current would then draw the tumblers on the cylinder lock inexorably into the proper position, and the key would turn. The Black Bat had yet to encounter a lock that would not yield.

But now, as he inserted the first key, his sharp ears caught the sound of shuffling footsteps beyond the door. The Black Bat withdrew into the shadows. A moment later the door swung open, and a white-thatched watchman exited, carrying a small tin pail. The man locked the door after him, and groped toward the end of the alley.

"That's a break," the Black Bat told himself. "Won't have to worry about the watchman until he's got his coffee at that joint around the corner."

In a matter of moments, the Black Bat was within the building. An index board directed him to the sixth floor. He sped up the dark stairs on rubber-soled feet, and turned down a gloomy corridor. Before a certain door he paused, and again the keys came from his belt.

The Black Bat stepped into the offices of the Acme Mortgage-Servicing Company, locking the door behind him. The place was in almost total darkness! But the Black Bat needed no lights: The pupils of his eyes dilated like those of a cat, and every object in the room was as clearly defined as though sunlight streamed into the place.

Against the wall was a cabinet-safe. The Black Bat knelt beside it and grasped the handle. To his surprise, it turned. The heavy door swung open.

Within the safe were the usual ledgers, such as any legitimate business would employ for the keeping of its records. The Black Bat set himself to the tiresome task of going through these records methodically, on the off-chance of finding some scrap of information that might put his foot upon the right track.

But in this he was disappointed. There were interminable lists of properties upon which mortgages were held through the Acme Company, but there was nothing to indicate that any of these mortgages were not absolutely regular.

HE sat back on his heels, the books strewn about him on the floor, and sighed heavily with annoyance. His search had been fruitless. Perhaps there was no connection between the company and those who burned buildings for profit. Perhaps the fact that Amos Willard had mortgaged his properties to this outfit shortly before the burnings was, indeed, coincidence.

The eyes of the Black Bat stared dismally into the empty interior of the safe. He had the sensation of having driven into a dead end street.

Then his eyes were telegraphing an impression to his brain. Didn't the bottom of the safe seem unnaturally heavy and thick? The Black Bat's knuckles rapped lightly against the steel. It seemed solid enough.

Still the Black Bat's fingers felt about the edges of the safe's bottom where it joined its walls. And there was space enough to accommodate the tip of his nail!

With renewed interest, he probed at the steel. Presently, he lifted and a thin steel sheet came upward in his hands. The safe's bottom was false. Beneath the tray was indeed more solid metal, but in the diametric center there was a flush-fitting plate, perhaps six by ten inches, and in this plate was a lock.

The lock yielded to the Black Bat's magnetic keys and the plate lifted out with the lock. In the cavity thus revealed lay a reddish fiber envelope, unmarked. His fingers lifted it out and turned it over. The envelope was sealed with hard wax.

The Black Bat studied it thoughtfully. Was there anything in the envelope worth seeing? If he broke the seals, the owner of the envelope would know it had been tampered with. Yet curiosity impelled him strongly. His search thus far had been fruitless, and now, here was this thing, hidden deep in a secret compartment in a strong safe. Perhaps it held the very information he sought.

He debated the advisability of taking the envelope home, and returning with it later in the night.

Then, with a growl of impatience, he ripped through the seals and drew forth the contents of the envelope. What he saw was an ordinary insurance policy. He spread it out and read it, whistling softly. The policy had been issued only three days before, and covered a valuable inventory of drug sundries in a warehouse leased by the Mercy Drug Company at 789 West Eighty-fourth Street.

Another dead end. Or was it? Anything in the nature of an insurance policy was suspicious these days. Furthermore, what was an insurance policy covering goods stored in a warehouse doing in the safe of the Acme Mortgage-Serving Company?

He again turned to the books of the company. There was no entry for the Mercy Drug Company, nor any record of a mortgage on the warehouse at 789 West Eighty-fourth Street. That was strange. Then there was no reasonable explanation for the existence of such a policy in the Acme safe.

The Black Bat slipped the policy back into the reddish envelope. For a moment, he hesitated. The fact that somebody had opened the envelope would be evident from the broken seals. Why not seal it again in his own fashion and let its owner wonder how it had been accomplished?

THE Black Bat moistened a small sticker and placed it on the back of the envelope. It stood out in bold relief against the reddish background—the weird, spread-winged image of a black bat in flight.

In less than a minute, everything had been replaced in the safe, The Black Bat swung shut the heavy door, and this time he locked it.

A clanging sound in the hallway brought him to a tense stop just before he reached the door. He heard a high-pitched voice—probably that of the old watchman.

"Want me to come with you, Mr. Hall?" it asked.

And then a deeper voice, its edge dulled with drink.

"No, no. 'S'all right. I'm okay."

There was the sound of the elevator door closing and the shuffling of uncertain feet in the hallway. The Black Bat crouched behind a desk. The chances were ten to one against the newcomer's coming to this particular office, but there was no point in taking chances.

A moment later, the Black Bat was glad be had paused. A figure, swaying slightly, was silhouetted against the glass panel of the door, and a key grated in the lock. The door opened, and Hall entered. Even in the darkness of the room, the Black Bat could easily distinguish his features.

Hall, he saw, was a large, florid man, with eyes too small and set too closely together. His mouth was loose, and his nose had the pointed, flared-nostril characteristics which bespoke a man shrewd and sly and cunning. His frame was powerful, and the Black Bat suspected that the slight bulge of his coat at the left armpit was caused by the presence of a gun.

Without switching on the lights, Hall proceeded unsteadily toward the safe. As he passed close to the Black Bat, the latter could smell the alcoholic aura which surrounded him.

Hall bent, tugged at the handle of the safe. It did not yield.

"'S'all right;' he murmured. "'S'locked. Was 'fraid I forgot."

He stood up, turned, and fumbled in his pockets for a cigarette and a match. With some difficulty he ignited the match with his fingernail and applied the flame to the wavering end of his cigarette.

Then, through the light of the match, he saw a dim black figure crouched behind a desk. The match dropped from his fingers and went out. There was a gasping intake of air in his throat, and he choked on the cigarette smoke. His right hand was fumbling for his left armpit.

"The Black Bat!"

His voice was low, but there was a note of hysteria in it.

"Don't reach for that gun!" advised the Black Bat. "Stand still, right where you are, and maybe you won't be hurt."

Hall's hand still crept toward his armpit. The barrel of one of the Black Bat's guns crashed on his forearm. Hall grunted in pain, cowering back

against the wall. The Black Bat's fingers reached beneath Hall's coat and lifted the gun from its holster.

"How—how can you see in the dark?" Hall quavered.

"Never mind that. I want to ask you a few questions—and I want straight answers!"

The Black Bat added point to his words by jabbing his automatic into the big man's midriff. Hall trembled violently.

"Look, you've got me all jittery. Let me get a drink. In my desk."

"All right. Have your drink. But remember I can see every move you make. Get going."

Hall stumbled across the large room, and into his private office. The Black Bat was close behind him, his gun ready. Hall fumbled for the bottle and glasses. The amber fluid gurgled out of the bottle.

Hall's mind, cleared of its heavy alcoholic burden by the shock of his encounter with the Black Bat, was working swiftly. If he, Hall, told this guy anything, he'd get himself bumped off surer than hell. The Boss wouldn't quibble over a squealer. On the other hand, what would the Black Bat do to him if he didn't talk? The man in the black mask sounded businesslike, and he could see in the dark—he had the advantage there.

Or could he see in the dark? Maybe that was just a gag.

With a movement incredibly swift in a man of his size, Hall hurled the bottle at the shadowy outline of the Black Bat. Had the Black Bat not been able to see it coming, his skull would have been cracked. He stepped quickly aside, and the bottle thudded against the back of a heavily upholstered divan across the room.

But Hall was following through, hurling his huge bulk in the direction of his shadowing captor. There was a low growl in his throat.

Instinctively, the Black Bat's finger tightened on the trigger of his automatic, but he stopped the pressure before the hammer tripped. A gun would make too much noise.

His free left arm swung in a wide arc. There was a sharp crack as his knuckles collided with the outthrust jaw of the other. All of the Black Bat's weight, as well as Hall's forward motion, contributed to that blow. Hall hurtled backward, his heels digging for balance.

Straight toward the lighter oblong of a window the big man's body flew. There was the tinkling crash of splintering glass, and Hall catapulted into space, his hands clawing at the empty air. One piercing, agonized scream tore itself from his fear-constricted throat. The ultimate pavement was six stories below.

CHAPTER IX
Flight Into Darkness

SOFTLY, the Black Bat cursed. Mischance had taken from him the first concrete opportunity of learning anything of importance. And the crashing glass and that scream of Hall's would bring people to the scene—people and policemen.

The Black Bat slipped into the corridor. This time he did not lock the door behind him. He sped noiselessly down the stairs. At the first floor he paused, listening for the watchman. There was no sound. In another moment he had gained the rear entrance. Twice, now, he had to pause to make use of his magnetic keys, once to make his exit, and again to leave the lock as he had found it.

Close to the shadow of the wall, he drifted through the alley. He peered around the corner to see single figures converging toward the front of the building. It was amazing how, even late at night and in an apparently deserted neighborhood, a crowd could gather.

The Black Bat heard the high-pitched voice of the old watchman.

"Poor fella! Yeah, he was a little drunk, I guess. You can still smell it on him. He musta fell out the window. Poor fella!"

The voice was blotted out by the piercing shriek of a siren.

The Black Bat removed the strangely shaped cloak, and the mask that hid the frightful scars about his eyes. He stowed both articles at his belt, and pulled the brim of his hat low over his face. Then he stepped around the corner and approached the little crowd.

He was not impelled by curiosity, nor by desire to remain any longer in the neighborhood than was necessary, but he had to pass the crowd to get to the coupé .

The Black Bat had one glimpse of the crushed figure of Hall, and it was not a pretty sight. An involuntary shudder passed over his frame.

All eyes in that little group were riveted in morbid fascination upon the corpse. None took note of the tall man in somber black. He passed silently down the street and stepped into the inconspicuous black car which stood beneath the lamppost.

As he threw the car into gear, another car screamed to the curb by the group on the sidewalk. A police car. The Black Bat sighed softly. He drove slowly and unobtrusively. As he neared the end of the block, another police car turned the corner to face him. Its siren wasn't howling.

The driver leaned on his brakes, and the other policeman swung out of the door. He seemed interested in the small black coupé .

Hall catapulted into space, his hands clawing at the air.

"Hold it!" he was yelling to the Black Bat. "Where do you think you're going?" And as though to lend weight to his question, he was tugging beneath the skirt of his blouse for the service pistol that nestled there.

The Black Bat recognized the young policeman. He had once been attached to the district attorney's office when Tony Quinn had been the incumbent at that post. There was not one chance in a million that he would fail to recognize the man in the black slouch hat.

Quinn ducked his head close to the steering wheel and jammed his foot down hard on the accelerator, the powerful motor beneath the commonplace hood took hold with amazing eagerness. The car leaped forward like a live thing. In the split-second it took for the cop to get his gun unlimbered, the Black Bat's car was around the corner.

He heard the grinding of the gears of the police car as its driver turned to take up the chase and, a minute later, the beams of its headlights swung the corner in pursuit.

By that time, the Black Bat had a lead of a couple of hundred yards, and the coupé was picking up speed at every turn of its wheels. The Black Bat switched off his lights.

Sixty—seventy—eighty. The needle of the speedometer crept around the dial. Without a siren, without even the beam of his lights to signal his approach to every intersection, the speed was suicidal. If any other car should exit from one of these side streets—

The Black Bat peered into his rear vision mirror. The police car was gaining upon him, its siren howling like a banshee. That flivver was capable of ninety miles an hour, and apparently the blue-coated driver was willing to open it up. But the Black Bat fed more go-grease to the thirsty cylinders of his own car.

EIGHTY-FIVE—ninety—ninety-five—a hundred miles an hour! And out of a side street came a lumbering, horse-drawn milk wagon, directly into the path of the hurtling mass of metal!

The Black Bat turned his wheel ever so slightly. A hard wrench at his maniacal speed would send him rolling end over end to destruction against the granite walls of the buildings that lined the way. The coupé ground in a tight slalom around the head of the horse. It was so close that the Black Bat could almost feel the animal's terrified breath against his face. Behind him he heard the tortured screeching of the brakes on the police car.

Without slackening his own speed, the Black Bat proceeded for several more blocks. He doubled in complex fashion until the siren sound was dimly distant, and then slowed to normal speed. He had lost track of the streets, and he paused at the next corner to peer up at the sign post. Sixth avenue and Eighty-eighth sweet. Good! He was almost where he wanted to be. He had a desire to look at a warehouse at 789 West 84th street.

The district in question was largely given over to warehouses and storage plants. An occasional truck stood backed up to a loading platform, taking on or discharging freight. Now and again a truck would rumble down the cobbled streets. Loaders and drivers seemed intent upon their labors. They took no notice of each other, or of the black coupé that moved slowly through the neighborhood.

Number 789 was a low, rambling building of brick, old and weathered. Its rickety loading platform was of wood and, somehow, the entire structure gave one the impression of being dry and brittle and inflammable in its interior parts.

Two huge trucks stood before the loading platform, their rear doors swung wide. A dozen men worked quietly and efficiently. Half were engaged in trundling cartons into the dim interior and the other half labored out with cartons of almost identical appearance. Simultaneously. one truck loaded while the other disgorged its contents. And on the front seat of each truck sat a grim-faced man with sharp eyes—sharp eyes that studied the black coupé as it passed.

All this the Black Bat noted on his one turn past the warehouse. He turned right at the corner, and went many blocks out of his way in order to approach the building, this time, from the far street.

On the surface, there hadn't been anything particularly suspicious about the transactions at the warehouse. Yet the Black Bat hadn't liked the looks of those grim-faced men in the cabs of the trucks, and an unloading of cartons identical with those being reloaded seemed strange, too. And then, there was that brand new insurance policy in the safe of the Acme Mortgage-Holding Company—

There were several cars parked before a building on Eighty-third Street, and lights shone from a door labeled "Office." Well, another car wouldn't roust any suspicions. The Black Bat parked and climbed out from under the wheel of the coupé quickly.

The property, which gave onto the rear of the warehouse, was a lot which served as headquarters for an auto-wrecking firm, A high board fence guarded the rare assortment of junk which littered the place. The Black Bat climbed over it easily and without undue noise.

He reached the back of the warehouse only to find no entrance there. The gloom-piercing eyes of the Black Bat swept up the blank wall of the building. From the edge of the roof jutted a stone gutter, apparently an integral part of the roof. The metal pipe—which had once led water from the gutter to

the ground—had long since rusted away, but the holes in the gutter still remained.

The Black Bat searched the chattered junk yard and found.a length of thin but stout cable almost as pliable as rope. At one end of this, he fastened a two-inch bolt, also retrieved from the ground. Again he stepped close to the building. His arm swung twice, once to gauge his aim, and the second time for keeps. The bolt soared into the air, its line trailing.

FOR a moment, the Black Bat held his breath. Then he grunted with satisfaction. The bolt fell neatly through the hole in the gutter and plummeted earthward. The Black Bat took a running hitch in the cable, and pulled it taut. He tested his weight on it, ready to spring back if the stone coping gave way. It held.

He paused now to slip on the weird mask which covered his face, and to don the strange cape with the flowing pointed ends. Once again, he grasped the cable in strong hands, and pulled himself swiftly upward.

Had there been any observer endowed with the power to see through darkness, he would have sworn that the figure which now swarmed up the shear wall of the warehouse could be nothing but a nightmarishly huge version of that nocturnal creature, the bat.

The owner of that name swung onto the roof. A dozen feet away was a flat trapdoor. Silently he moved toward it, tested it with prying fingers. It lifted easily.

The Black Bat retraced his steps. He untied the cable, threw it to the ground some distance from the wall. He would have to find some other means of leaving the building. He could afford to leave no sign that someone had gained access to the roof.

He listened carefully at the trapdoor before he lifted it sufficiently to slip through. The upper floor of the warehouse was deserted, but he could hear the men still working on the floor below. The interior of the upper floor was three shades darker than absolute black, but the Black Bat could see clearly enough.

He hung by one hand, while the other let the door gently down until it rested upon his knuckles. Then he dropped. There was a slight clunk as the door fell shut, but the Black Bat made no sound as his feet hit the floor.

The warehouse had the dry, musty smell of old wood, and the Black Bat could see that the place was a tinderbox.

There were several rows of huge cartons in the center of the floor. Labels proclaimed these cartons to contain drug staples of the more expensive varieties. The Black Bat supposed that such a quantity of such drugs would be worth a considerable sum of money. Near the far end of the floor was an oblong of light that denoted a stairway, and close to that was the platform of an antiquated elevator.

As he neared the stairway, he suddenly froze to immobility. Steps creaked on the protesting wood of the stairs. Somebody was coming up. And more than one person—two or three.

The Black Bat retreated to the cover of a row of cartons.

Three heads came through the oblong of light, and then the men reached the upper floor of the warehouse. Each carried a box, perhaps a foot square.

One of these men, the Black Bat recognized immediately, was a particularly vicious criminal known as Conal. As district attorney, Tony Quinn had sent him to prison on a manslaughter charge five years before. His companions, the Black Bat did not know. One was a heavy, blue-jowled man. The other was a slim figure, with a completely flattened nose which gave his speech a strong nasal quality.

The man with the nasal voice was talking.

"Come on, you hombres! Are you scared of the dark, or are you expecting to meet the Black Bat?"

The Black Bat smiled.

CHAPTER X
Holocaust!

CONAL whined.

"Cut it out, willya? It gives me the creeps just to think about that guy!" Then, as the flat-nosed man laughed derisively. "You think you're pretty hot stuff, don't you, Berren!"

"I hope the Black Bat is in here," Berren was saying. "The joint'd make a pretty funeral pyre for him!"

"Shut up!" said the blue-jowled man. "We got work to do. Where the hell is the light switch?"

"I got it," said Conal.

There was a click and a single bulb glowed to life in the center of the big room. It cast only a vague light, and left wide shadows behind the rows of cartons.

The three men went methodically to work. The lids of the boxes opened to reveal a considerable quantity of a coarse, reddish substance not fine enough to be called powder. This they traced over the floor in a continuous and intricate pattern.

"Run the line to the stairs and be sure it connects with the stuff on the lower floor," Berren ordered. "I gotta get the ribbon set."

The Black Bat watched the proceedings with keen interest. Here were the men, without a doubt, who were responsible for the seventeen deaths of

the night before. They received their orders from higher up, of course, for none of the three was sufficiently intelligent to work a large scale plot through to its cunning end. But theirs were the hands that did the actual deviltry.

Hate burned in the breast of the Black Bat—hate for these cold-blooded killers and all others of their kind. Fierce pride burned in him, too—pride and thankfulness that he could do something to help clear them from the Earth.

He moved cautiously along the shadowed line of cartons as the blue-jowled man approached. But careful as he was, there was a squeak as his foot touched a rotten plank.

Berren looked up, his eyes wide.

"What was that?"

The blue-jowled man grunted.

"A rat, you fool. The place is lousy with 'em."

The Black Bat exhaled silently. Apparently reassured, Berren knelt and produced a long ribbon of gray metallic appearance. One end of this he placed in a small pile of the reddish substance which connected with the intricate traceries of the same material.

Outside powerful motors roared to life.

"There go the trucks," Conal called. "We're all set. Five minutes gives us plenty time to get around the corner to the car."

Berren twisted off a section of the gray ribbon.

"This thing's too long."

He tossed the discarded portion to the floor. He fished in his pocket. Conal and the blue-jowled man stood over him, watching.

"I hate to think what'd happen to us if anything went wrong with the layout!" Conal breathed tremulously.

"Nothing's going wrong," said Berren. He struck a match, and applied the flame to the end of the gray ribbon. Dull red showed, and ate its way slowly along the metallic substance.

"Let's go!"

THEY started toward the stairway.

"Just a minute!"

The voice was low and even and deadly. The three arsonists stopped as though transfixed, turning slowly to peer in the direction of the voice.

"The Black Bat!" The words came in a whisper from Berren's throat.

The Black Bat's automatics were leveled.

"Who's behind this? Who gives you your orders?"

The blue-jowled man's eyes were fixed upon the glowing ribbon, and there was horror in his eyes.

"We gotta get outta here!"

"Yeah, take us outta here, and we'll talk!" Berren's voice wheedled.

The Black Bat's eyes flashed.

"How about those people in the tenements last night? Did you give them a chance to get out? No, you'll talk now. Talk or burn!"

The blue-jowled man still gazed at that glowing ribbon. It was shorter now—nearer to the pile of reddish sand.

"I'll talk!" he cried. "I'll talk! Anything, only let us get outta here!"

"All right—talk!"

"Shut up, you fool!" Conal hissed. "Talk, and you'll die anyway!"

The corners of the Black Bat's mouth went up in a grim smile. In the pinch, it was Canal, after all, who showed the most nerve.

"All right," said the Black Bat philosophically, "we stay."

His eyes never left the figures before him, but those other three sets of eyes rested upon the ribbon slowly consuming itself. A minute passed, the perspiration stood out upon the foreheads of the three killers.

The mouth of the blue-jowled man sagged open, and his breath hissed through his teeth. Fear glazed his ayes.

"Ribbon must be getting pretty short," the Black Bat observed conversationally. "Any of you birds ready to talk?"

"Stop it!" screamed the blue-jowled man. His voice was tight with hysteria. "Stop it, for God's sake, stop it!"

He lunged forward, his clawing hands reaching for the Black Bat.

The Black Bat's finger tightened. His automatic coughed. The slug pounded into the other man's shoulder, spun him in a half circle. With a cry of pain, the man slumped to the floor.

But the machinery of battle had been set in motion. Berren threw himself forward. Again the Black Bat's pistol spoke, and Berren stopped dead, his face a mask of surprise, before he pitched forward.

Conal leaped behind the wall of cartons. The Black Bat heard a shot, and a leaden pellet sang past his head viciously. He threw himself sideways, and took a snap shot at the light bulb, It went out.

The ribbon of flame glowed brightly red, dangerously near to the pile of combustible powder.

"Better come out, Conal! You can't see him in the dark—and there isn't much time left!"

AGAIN he darted quickly to one side. It was well that he did for, with a curse, Conal emptied his pistol in the direction of the voice. The arsonist stood in full view of the Black Bat, as clearly defined in the darkness as he would have been in broad daylight. But the Black flat hesitated to shoot. It was too easy.

The man with the wounded shoulder was dragging himself painfully across the floor, whimpering in fear. Berren lay quite still, and a rivulet of blood oozed from a neat hole in the center of his forehead.

It was almost ludicrous to see Conal in the blackness of the warehouse, pressing a fresh clip of cartridges into the magazine of his heavy automatic.

The Black Bat stooped, picked up the section of ribbon which Berren. had torn from the strip. He shoved it into his pocket. Into another pocket he dropped a scant handful of the heavy powder from the mound.

Now his foot stepped down on the blazing ribbon, and there was the acrid smell of burning rubber. But the fire crept on, only inches away from the powder.

The Black Bat did not know, for once, what to do. If he kicked the ribbon away from its target, it might easily encounter another line of the reddish substance. If he picked it up and attempted to carry it from the place, a stray spark dripping from it could be equally disastrous.

Conal was moving slowly across the floor, toward the oblong of light that might mean escape from the creature who had already accounted for his two companions.

The Black Bat streaked toward him. Conal heard the feet on the rotten planks and turned, his gun blazing. The Black Bat's twin automatics belched their answer. Conal's body shuddered as the slugs took effect, and slumped lazily to the floor.

Besides the Black Bat, only one man still lived in the embattled warehouse. The blue-jowled man still crept painfully toward the stairs. The Black Bat could not bring himself to leave this murderer behind. Besides, in his thoroughly shaken condition, the man might talk.

The Black Bat was beside him, helping the big man to his feet.

"Who's that? Berren? Conal?"

"It's not Berren or Conal," the Black Bat said quietly. "Come, I'll help you out. There's not much time."

The blue-jowled man's breath sucked into his lungs in a great gasp.

"The Black Bat!"

"Yes. Come on, you fool!"

"No! No!"

The other's voice wailed upward in a terrified crescendo of hysteria. His one good arm closed in a steel-like grip about the Black Bat's neck. His knee jabbed at the Black Bat's groin. For a moment, the Black Bat hovered on the brink of unconsciousness. Pain permeated his body, racking him with hot waves of agony.

The grip about his throat tightened. The other man seemed determined, in his extremity of pain and fear, to take his enemy with him through the portals of Death.

But the Black Bat showed no desire to go on that final journey. Strength flowed slowly back into him and his steel fingers closed upon the throat of his adversary. The man's constricted breath hissed in his car. At last, the death-grip of the blue-jowled man relaxed, and he lay in an inert heap, his face a blotched purple.

The Black Bat staggered to his feet. And at that moment, there was a puff of white flame where the metal ribbon touched the reddish powder! Fingers of searing flame reached along the floor, melting the rotten wood of the planking into a curtain of flame.

IT came on with incredible swiftness, passing over the figure of Berren. The body crisped to a writhing nothingness. No wonder these tenements had gone up in a matter of minutes! No wonder the seventeen had died without a chance to escape the all-engulfing holocaust!

The heat was unbearable. The Black Bat could feel his skin drying in the fire's scorching breath. And in another moment, the flames themselves would be upon him, washing him from life in the space of a single second.

He turned and ran for the stairway. The inferno raced after him, shrieking its rage. It was like a nightmare in which the sleeper runs from some inexorable "Thing" which cannot be outdistanced.

He swung down the stairs. Flame dripped after him. It was dripping through the ceiling of the lower floor, too, setting up a mad pattern of new fires. He crashed his way through the closely piled cartons toward the wide, sliding door that was only partially opened. Long tongues of flame licked out hungrily at him.

A last despairing leap took him through the door, and even as he gained the street the entire interior of the warehouse puffed into a seething cauldron of fire in which nothing could survive. A blast of heat hurled after him through the door, and the force of it sent him crashing to the pavement like the blow of a giant fist.

The Black Bat climbed to his feet. His lungs burned, and tears stung his eyes. He gasped great draughts of the clear night air into his lungs.

The street was still deserted. Swiftly the Black Bat tore off his mask and cloak and pulled the wide brim of the black hat over his scarred eyes. Behind him the warehouse was a writhing mass of fury. He moved away, his long stride carrying him down the fitfully lighted street.

As he neared the corner, a policeman made the turn, coming straight at him with nightstick raised, running full tilt.

The Black Bat had no time for arguments or

explanations. His right arm hooked out and his fist caught the policeman flush on the chin. The man hadn't even time enough to look surprised. He went down like a pole-axed steer.

The Black Bat went on, turning the corner. There was a bright red box on a post. He smashed its glass face, yanked at the hook.

Seconds later, he was in the powerful black coupé , driving carefully toward his home. The sky behind him was brightly crimson, and fire apparatus passed him on his way, thundering through the quiet streets.

A grim smile of satisfaction lifted the corners of the Black Bat's mouth. He had not succeeded in wringing any information from the three thugs. He had been unable to save the doomed building. But he had, at least, established beyond question that gangdom—a cruel and organized gangdom—was behind the fires. And in his pockets, he had samples of the horrible ingredients the criminals used in the setting of their fearsome blazes!

If only he hadn't met that cop! He would suspect who the dark-clad stranger was, and the cry of "Bat" would be ringing in all the newspapers tomorrow morning. Well, maybe that was all right, too.

CHAPTER XI
Rats and Thermite

QUINN entered the gate house on his own estate, and hurried through the secret tunnel which connected with the main house. As he lifted the trapdoor which gave access to the room behind the false fireplace, he was met by the sight of Butch's bulk and a huge fist drawn back in businesslike fashion.

"Oh, it's you!" Butch said almost disappointedly. He sighed. "But some day somebody's going to come through that trap who shouldn't be coming through it, and I'm going to knock him right out from between his ears!"

"Poor chap!" said the Black Bat.

He was standing before the small laboratory table which graced a corner of the small room, and he was pouring a scant handful of reddish grains upon a thick glass slide. From another pocket he produced a small section of grayish metallic ribbon.

"What's all that?" Butch demanded.

The man in black did not answer at once. He slipped from his somber garments, and dressed in his gray house clothes.

"When Tony Quinn is at home," he said, "it's not a bad idea for him to to be ready to greet visitors."

Again Butch O'Brien pointed to the materials upon the table.

"What's all that stuff?" he asked again.

"That," said Quinn, "is thermite."

Butch's eyes narrowed. "Are you trying to kid me, Quinn? Termites are little ants that eat through wooden buildings."

Quinn nodded. "True. *Thermite* eats through wooden buildings, too—and a lot faster. Watch!"

He placed the metal ribbon so that one end of it touched the reddish pile.

"This ribbon," he explained, "is made of pressed magnesium. As you see, it burns?"

He touched the flame of a match to the end of the ribbon, and it glowed into life, creeping toward the glass slide.

"The powder," Tony Quinn continued, "is a mixture of fine aluminum filings and iron oxide, which is merely ordinary iron rust. But I suspect that this particular mixture contains still another ingredient, an ingredient of terrible power. Watch!"

The glowing ribbon burned to the pile. There was a *pufff*, and a blinding flash of sustained flame. Butch's arms went up before his eyes.

The white heat ate through the glass, liquefying it, and the molten glass, in turn, ate at the porcelain tabletop. The sound of sharp cracklings filled the room. Heat summered the air.

At last, the light and the heat subsided. Slide and tabletop were utterly ruined. Butch stared at the wreckage. His voice, when he spoke, was a mixture of awe and respect.

"That's some stuff, Quinn!"

"Pretty effective, isn't it? Welders use thermite industrially and, like most good industrial products, it can be corrupted into inhuman usage. Munitions makers load it into incendiary bombs, and now we've seen what firebugs can do with it, too! But as I said before, Butch, this is the most potent thermite I've ever seen. There's some extra ingredient in it that gives it an effect so devastating that I shudder to think of it!"

Butch was staring at him, wide-eyed. "And this is the stuff they used in those burnings last night? If I could just make those rats sit in a pile of this stuff themselves!" His gestures suggested that he would take much pleasure in such a sight.

"Three of them did just that tonight, Butch," Quinn said quietly. "And it isn't a pleasant sight even for people you hate, believe me!"

TONY QUINN outlined his night's adventures. Butch listened avidly, his small, honest eyes aglow with excitement.

"You should have taken me with you, Tony!" he said when Quinn had finished. "Between us we coulda dragged those three monkeys outta the warehouse and sat on 'em until they talked!"

Quinn smiled. "Perhaps you're right, Butch. I'm willing to admit that you're a handy man in a pinch."

"Yeah," Butch said disgustedly, biting the end off a cigar. "I'm a handy guy in a pinch, so what am I doing when the pinch happens? I'm playing telephone girl, waiting for calls that don't come! And does even Lieutenant McGrath come to the door looking for trouble? He doesn't! It ain't fair, Quinn!"

Tony Quinn was laughing aloud. With considerable annoyance, Butch lighted his cigar and puffed furiously. Quinn sniffed the blue smoke.

"What on Earth do you do to those cigars of yours, Butch? They smell like moth balls."

"Camphor," explained Butch. "I like a cool smoke, see, so I put the cigars in a humidor with camphor for a few days." His face darkened. "But don't change the subject, Quinn! How come I play telephone girl when there's work to be done?"

"Don't get excited, Butch. I've got a job for you—tonight!"

Butch beamed hopefully.

"Tonight? Good! Do I get to smash anybody?"

"I hope it won't be necessary."

Quinn scribbled on a piece of paper, his photographic memory reproducing in his brain a page in one of the books of the Acme Mortgage-Servicing Company. "Here are two addresses and the names of two people. One is a young man, the other is a woman. I want you to bring them here, but you'll have to blindfold them, of course, before you bring them in through the tunnel."

Butch groaned. "Getting the guy is all right. I'll bring him back on foot or over my shoulder. But how can I go ringing a dame's doorbell at three o'clock in the morning?"

"That's easy. Turn on your fatal charm."

"Cut it out, Quinn. You know I ain't any ladies' man."

Tony Quinn shrugged. "You, wanted something to do, and I gave you something. Of course, if you think that you can't do it—"

"Okay," grumbled Butch. "Okay, I'll do it!"

At this point, the trapdoor moved upward, and the dignified head and shoulders of Professor Kelton appeared. Butch dove at the stranger, his fingers seeking the throat. Quinn managed, with some difficulty, to drag him free.

"Your disguise is too good, Silk!" he said.

Silk nursed his throat gingerly, climbing into the room. The grinning face of Carol followed.

"Well, doggone!" muttered Butch. "I didn't know it was you two!"

Silk glowered at him. "Remind me never to wear a disguise again without getting your okay!"

"Sure," said Butch.

Tony Quinn and the girl went into the living room.

"Well, Pop and I rented us a nice apartment on the Drive. What do we do now?" Carol asked.

Quinn's eyes narrowed.

"Better get some rest, for one thing," said Quinn. "Tomorrow's another day."

SILK and Butch came in.

"Incidentally," Silk said, "there's a big warehouse fire on the West Side. Wonder if there's any connection between that and last night's fires?"

In a few words, Quinn told them of his night's adventures. With frowning, thoughtful eyes, Carol and Silk looked from each other to their fearless chief.

"And what d'you think I'm supposed to do?" Butch demanded. "I'm supposed to kidnap a guy and a dame in the middle of the blasted night—right now!"

"But I want those two people!" Quinn said. "The entire success of our fight against this vicious ring of arsonists may well depend upon their being brought here tonight! Still, I suppose I can do it myself!"

He moved toward the room behind the fireplace. Tonight, his nerves were more jangled than he ever remembered their being before. The harrowing experience in the flaming warehouse had left him spent and exhausted.

It was Carol who took charge. She caught at Quinn's arm, and there was an imploring look in her eyes.

"Tony, you know any one of us would do anything you asked! But Butch is right, don't you see that? If he starts trying to take a girl from her home in the dead of night, the girl will yell for the police. It's a job for a woman, Tony. I'll go with him and see that nothing happens."

Tony Quinn smiled down at her, and his hard eyes softened. His hand closed on the hand which lay on his arm.

"Thanks, Carol. You're right—as usual."

Carol turned to Silk.

"Make some coffee, strong coffee. All right, Butch, my boy, let's be going."

Together the huge, homely man and the slim, lovely girl walked into the secret room, and a moment later they had disappeared through the door in the floor.

CHAPTER XII
An Interrupted Message

DRAINING the cup, Tony Quinn drank great mouthfuls of steaming coffee laced with brandy. Fatigue drained from his body, and a sense of well-being stole over him.

"That's mighty good coffee, Silk," he complimented.

Silk nodded. "Ought to be! Costs you better than a dollar a cup!"

"What are you talking about r'

"That's right. The brandy is Napoleon, 1814 version. Costs fifty bucks a bottle."

"Nothing's too good for us, eh, Silk?"

"For you, sir; I don't pull that particular cork for anybody but you."

"You show remarkable restraint, Silk." Tony Quinn drained his cup.

Silk carried the tray to the kitchen. When he returned, Quinn was sitting before a large desk, on the top of which was spread a map of the city. Silk peered over his shoulder.

Quinn had made three red pencil marks upon the map.

"The three fires, eh?" suggested Silk. Quinn nodded. "The first two netted somebody twenty thousand dollars. The third—the warehouse fire tonight—is really big-time. Silk, everything in that warehouse was phony. They insured an inventory of valuable drugs, then moved the stuff out and substituted junk."

"Who did?" demanded Silk.

"The Mercy Drug Company," said Quinn. "But I've a hunch they won't be collecting any insurance on that little job! You see, it's going to seem funny when three bodies are found in the smoking ruins of that warehouse. It's also going to seem funny to have a cop say that somebody who might have been the Black Bat came out of that blazing building and smacked him.

"The insurance company will not pay the claim unless some of those little details can be explained by the policy holder, the Mercy Drug Company. And I'll bet you that Napoleon brandy against a bottle of soda pop that the Mercy Drug Company won't even file the claim!"

"You mean, sir," asked Silk, "that the Mercy Drug Company will already have ceased to exist?"

"That's what I think."

"If that's the case," Silk said, "what we've managed to do so far will have been worthwhile. Perhaps, if the crooks find that they can't profit from their crimes, they'll be less likely to perpetrate any others."

Tony Quinn shook his head sadly.

"Considering your own early career, Silk, you show a remarkable lack of insight into the criminal mind. You should know that nothing heightens the avarice of a criminal so much as to see one of his carefully planned crimes go amiss. I'm afraid there will be more trouble than ever, now."

"And in the meantime," complained Silk. "I'm dressed up to represent a guy named Kelton, and I have an apartment on the Drive, and I don't know what it's all about. Would you mind explaining?"

"Not at all," said Quinn. "You're just establishing yourself as a good, solid citizen, and when the proper moment arrives, you're going into the real estate business."

"The real estate business? Are you crazy?"

"Probably," admitted Quinn. There was, suddenly, the round of screaming tires in the street. "Hand me my cane and my dark glasses, will you, Silk? We're going to have visitors, or at any rate a visitor."

Silk did as he was requested. Quinn slipped the opaque lenses over his scarred eyes. "Now get into the secret room and keep the others quiet when they arrive!" he said.

There was a sharp stab at the doorbell.

"How did you know?" Silk demanded.

Quinn smiled. "When you're blind, your other faculties become more acute. For example, you get to realize that a car which screams to a stop from fifty miles an hour is usually a police car, and when it stops in front of your house, you imagine that perhaps you are about to have a caller. Of course, you can follow the same line of reasoning even if you aren't blind. Now beat it while I let McGrath in!"

QUINN watched until the fireplace had swung shut behind Silk, then *tap-tapped* to the front door. He called cautiously through the panel.

"Who's there?"

He heard, first, a deep groan, and then an unmistakable voice.

"Okay, Quinn, open up!"

Quinn threw the bolt.

"Oh, Lieutenant McGrath! Come in, Lieutenant."

The detective entered. He glared suspiciously about the hall, and through the wide arch into the adjoining living room.

"Up pretty late, aren't you, Mr. Quinn?"

Quinn was leading the way. His shoulder thudded against the door frame.

"Late? To tell you the truth, Lieutenant. I have no idea what time it is. My man's not here tonight, and I've been reading."

"Reading? Did you say reading?" There was an unholy glint in McGrath's eyes, and a grin of long-awaited satisfaction suffused his bulldog countenance. "How can a blind man read?"

Quinn's hand fumbled for the desktop. "Braille, Lieutenant. You read through your fingertips. Fascinating." He held a book in McGrath's general direction. "Care to try your hand at it?"

"No, thanks!" McGrath helped himself to a perfecto from the humidor on Quinn's desk. He sniffed at it, then, apparently well satisfied as to its quality, he bit off a section of the end and placed the remainder of the cigar in his vest pocket.

"There was another fire tonight," he said at last.

"Really?" said Quinn politely, concern in his voice.

"Arson," said McGrath. "A warehouse with a valuable inventory of drugs. They've found two bodies already, and there may be more."

"Good heavens, I hope not!" said Quinn. "A horrible business, Lieutenant, a horrible business!"

"Yes. And there was a young cop named Mahoney slugged by somebody he said was all dressed in black."

"That would be the Black Bat, I suppose."

"It would indeed. The young cop that was slugged is my nephew on my sister's side. A fine lad, and as brave as they come, but he hasn't stopped shakin' yet! Now, what I want to know is, what would the Black Bat be doin' at that fire?"

"I wouldn't know."

"I'm thinkin' maybe he set it."

Quinn shrugged. "That's a possibility, of course, but it doesn't shape up with the Black Bat's activities in the past, does it? Usually he's on the side of the law, in spite of his methods."

McGrath seemed to ignore that.

"Earlier in the night, a guy named Hall fell out a window and got killed. He was drunk," he said.

"Too bad. Unfortunate dissipation. But what's the connection, Lieutenant?"

McGrath sighed heavily. "None, I'm afraid. Unless you can tell me something, Quinn!"

Quinn smiled tolerantly. "How long is it since you've taken a vacation, Lieutenant? Seven years? You really ought to drift off someplace and let the hallucinations blow out of your brain!"

McGrath bristled. "Hallucinations, is it? Well, one of these fine days I'm going to see those hallucinations turn solid, and on that day there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth, and it won't be me who's doin' the weeping and gnashing! Does *that* make sense, Quinn?"

"No," said Quinn, "it doesn't." McGrath started for the door. "But you're welcome to that cigar!" Quinn added.

McGRATH stopped, glaring at him. Then he jammed his derby over his ears and slammed out of the house.

The fireplace swung open. The little room behind it looked like the subway at rush hour. In addition to Tony Quinn's three aides, there were a boy and girl whom he had never seen before. Both were blindfolded, and the boy's face was almost as white as the handkerchief that covered his eyes. The girl had the advantage of makeup.

"Almost we didn't get 'em!" said Butch. "The guy wasn't at the address you gave us, so we went to the girl's place. And what d'you think? They were just leaving!"

"Leaving for where?" Quinn asked.

Tommy Ahern spoke through tight lips. "None of your damn business! And tell this gorilla to take the blindfolds off of us!"

"Be quiet, Tommy!" the girl named Helen said. "This girl said we wouldn't be harmed, and I trust her. I don't know what it's all about, but we have nothing to hide." She faced in Quinn's direction. "I can't see you, but I like your voice. Tommy and I were going to rent a car and go upstate and get married tonight. That's all there is to it."

Quinn smiled. "That seems a perfectly respectable thing to do. Look, Tommy, how much money do you earn?"

"Sixteen bucks a week," the boy said sullenly. "But Helen earns twenty. We'll get along. Anyway, what business is it of yours?"

"None," admitted Quinn. "But how would you like it if your wife didn't have to work?"

"I'd like that fine," said Tommy. "But that'll come later."

"It'll come right now," Tony Quinn corrected him. "Helen quits her job, and I pay you the extra twenty bucks every week—make it twenty-five."

"What's the hitch?"

"No hitch at all. Helen quits her job, and the young lady who brought you here takes it over in her name. That's all."

"No good. Even if it's on the level, the boss'd know the difference. He's made plenty of passes at Helen, the rat!"

"He won't be making passes at anybody else, ever," said Quinn. "He's dead."

The girl gasped. "Dead? How—"

"That doesn't matter," Quinn said. "The important thing is that he's dead, and that he richly deserved to die. Listen, Helen, you say that you trust the young woman who brought you here, and you've also been kind enough to say that you like my voice. All I can tell you is that we're honest people and that your late boss wasn't. We need your help, and the only way you can help is to accept the proposition I've just made you. What d'you say?"

"I say all right," Helen said. "And that goes for Tommy, too—or I won't marry him!"

"Okay, okay," Tommy said.

TONY QUINN opened his billfold, extracted a crisp note which boasted the figure one and two ciphers in each corner. This he folded and slipped into the palm of Tommy Ahern.

"That's a wedding present," he said. "And as you'll need someone to stand up with you, the people who brought you here will drive you to a preacher and, incidentally, make all the necessary arrangements for the rest of our little deal. Good luck!"

The party of four disappeared into the dark tunnel.

Silk sighed, "There goes the best daughter a man ever had!" he said.

"Carol's a very clever girl," Quinn pointed out. "I see no reason why she shouldn't be able to be Helen Scott of the Acme Mortgage-Servicing Company and the daughter of Professor Kelton at one and the same time. At any rate, my professor friend, you'd better be getting back to your little nest on the Drive."

Silk scribbled on a small piece of paper. "That's the address," he said, "and the telephone number of the building. Good night, Chief. You'd better get some rest!"

"Good night, Silk. Yes, I'll get some sleep."

Silk stepped from the room, and the fireplace swung shut behind him. Tony Quinn sat down before the large desk, but the "blind" former district attorney did not take up the book of Braille. He poured, instead, over a map of the city on which were three red pencil marks. Quinn had a crazy idea that those marks represented the beginnings of a pattern—a definite, diabolical pattern that might yet furnish an answer to the why of the fires, and to the as yet, unknown fiends who set them.

CHAPTER XIII
Parole Jumper

UNFORTUNATELY, Tony Quinn was wrong about the Mercy Drug Company, They not only filed a claim for insurance on the warehouse full of drugs—they actually collected. Three bodies had been found in the ruins, and although two of these bodies were burned beyond hope of identification, the third was named as one Rudolf Berren. The identification was established by means of dental work done recently by a local dentist.

"Imagine the unmitigated gall of it!" Quinn said to Carol. "They claim that Berren was their watchman, and that he lost his life in combat with arsonists who also died in the fire. Therefore, they have a reasonable premise upon which to base their claim.

"Not only that, but the insurance company is also mulcted on a ten thousand dollar policy on Berren's life, which could not be payable if it could be established that he lost his life in a criminal undertaking!"

"And the beneficiary of the life policy was Berren's brother?" asked Carol.

Quinn nodded. "And the brother sailed for South America the day the policy was paid, said he'd always wanted to go there! Of course, it's perfectly obvious how that was managed. Whoever's behind this thing has got it figured to pay him a profit of some sort no matter what happens. You can bet that the brother who left for South America didn't leave with ten thousand dollars in his jeans. He's lucky if he was allowed to keep half of it."

"Pretty idea, isn't it?" Carol said.

"Very nice. And there was the same story in the case of Hall. He falls out of a window and gets himself killed, and there's a $15,000 policy on his life, payable to his estate. His estate goes to his wife, who's a miserable, frightened little woman. She won't say a thing to a soul, but do you suppose for a minute that part of that dough isn't being handed over to somebody else?"

"And how about the Mercy Drug Company?" Carol wanted to know.

"Small jobbing outfit," said Quinn, "and in business for twenty years. The owner is a man named Halley. I sat on the edge of his bed for two hours last night, and though he was scared stiff he wouldn't slip an inch. Said he'd taken a loss on a valuable inventory of drugs, and that was all there was to it."

"Too bad you hadn't taken the policy from the Acme safe when you were there," Carol said. "That would have made it a little tougher for them to collect."

QUINN was studying the map of the city again. He looked up, shaking his head.

"No, let them collect their insurance. Give 'em enough rope and they'll hang themselves. But the touch I like is the fact that they hadn't any insurance on the warehouse itself. That makes it tools good. And, as a matter of fact, they probably couldn't get any insurance on the old rats' nest. It was on the verge of collapse anyway.

"They still have the land, and the land alone is worth as much as the land with the warehouse on it."

"Who's the owner?"

"Man named Curland. Insignificant little guy who's sorry he lost his tenant for the warehouse. Our friend, Professor Kelton, is calling on him just about this time, with an eye to buying the property?"

"What on Earth for?" demanded Carol.

Quinn grinned broadly. "Principally because our friend Professor Kelton was getting a bad case of armchairitis. He was beginning to demand a little action." The former D.A.'s face grew more serious. "Too, I've a hunch—just a silly little hunch, mind you—that something might happen if Silk manages to buy that property."

"Even a hunch is better than nothing," Carol sighed. "I've been working in the offices of the Acme Company for a week now, and all I do all day is listen to Tommy Ahern telling me how happy he and Helen are! The man who took over Hall's job is about as communicative as a fish."

"Yes. Our plodding genius, Butch O'Brien, has been doing detective work on Acme's Mr. Dunbar, you know, and all he can find out is that Dunbar

comes from San Francisco, and Dunbar admits that himself!"

Carol paced the room, her high heels clicking across the parquet.

"We're not getting anyplace, Tony Quinn."

Quinn was up and across the room to her side.

"Sure we are! We know the Acme Company's crooked, and that's something. We've got you planted there, and I have confidence enough in you to know that you'll catch the first wrong ball they pitch. On top of that, Silk's buying a building from a guy who's mixed up somehow in this thing. And if you want another tip, it might interest you to know that I've developed quite an interest in maps!"

Carol smiled up at him quizzically, and for a moment she put her head against the soft sleeve of his coat.

"Tony," she said affectionately, "you're a nut! What have maps to do with it?"

"Quite a bit, I think. But it's like studying the map of a battlefield. I doesn't make sense until you've figured out the terrain, and until you know where your enemy has his forces drawn up. When you know all that, you can begin to stick pins in the map, move up your infantry and your heavy artillery."

They both turned as the fireplace swung outward to admit Silk Kirby in his role of the Professor. The Professor's dignified countenance was strangely animated. The old gentleman seemed excited.

"I've bought that land!" he exclaimed. "I told Curland I was interested in housing, and wanted to build a model tenement. The price is twenty-five thousand dollars for the land, and Curland contracts to remove the wreckage of the warehouse!"

"Very good," said Quinn. "But that in itself isn't enough to make you as excited as a Mexican jumping bean, Silk. What else?"

"You won't believe me. It's too good."

"Let's hear it anyway. We'll give you the benefit of the doubt."

"Well, Curland seemed impressed by my interest in building model tenements for the poor, said he thought it was a very nice idea indeed. Then he suggested that it must take a good deal of money for that sort of thing, and if I wasn't too well-heeled with liquid capital, he thought he could put me in touch with an outfit that put out money on mortgages on very good terms considering the bad state of the mortgage market."

"And that outfit, I suppose," Carol said, "would be the company for which I now work."

"That's right, the Acme Mortgage-Servicing Company! Can you tie that?"

"Not easily," admitted Quinn. "When do you see them?"

"Tomorrow morning."

"Good. With you and Carol both sitting in their offices, we ought to go to town!"

BUTCH came through the fireplace. Tony Quinn said, "I'm thinking of putting a revolving door there."

Butch was haggard. There were dark circles beneath his eyes, and his clothes were rumpled. He sank heavily into the nearest chair, glowering at the others.

"Those airplanes," he complained, "are no good for sleeping. Sixteen hours to San Francisco, and another sixteen back again! And eight hours hunting all over that burg looking for information about a guy named Dunbar. Anyway, I got the information. The guy's a parole jumper, and his real name's Jones, believe it or not!"

"Why, if you say so, I'll believe it, Butch," said Quinn. "And the information is very interesting. It gives us a nice lead pipe to swing over his head if necessary, and if it isn't necessary, we can always ship him back to the California authorities, anyway."

"Good," said Butch. "How's about lending a guy a bed for the night, Quinn? I'm too tired to even get to my own place."

"You're welcome to stay," said Quinn, "but you aren't going to do any sleeping. You've got to read some scientific material, and you've got to learn it!" He ignored the horrible groans which arose from the deep chest of Butch O'Brien.

"Yes, before morning you have to be at least a half-expert on matters explosive and incendiary, for bright and early you go out to meet a man named Kenneth Weeks, who happens to be city engineer."

Quinn took a newspaper clipping from his desk.

"This was in tonight's paper."

The others grouped together and read the clipping:

WAR DEPARTMENT CLAIMS PATENT

Washington, Mar. 5—The United States War Department today appropriated a patent filed by the city engineer of a large Eastern city. It was understood that the formula was for material to he used in incendiary bombs of a nature far more destructive than anything hitherto conceived.

The Secretary of War announced that because of the horrible efficiency of the formula, it would not be used by the armed forces at this time, but would be filed in the vaults of the department. It is understood that the inventor, being a reserve officer, is technically an employee of the Government, which make the Government's step in taking over the patent entirely legal.

"But the large Eastern city it speaks of could be any large Eastern city," Silk said.

"But this is the only large Eastern city where

there have been fires that burned buildings as buildings have never before been burned," Quinn pointed out.

"Let's pose a hypothetical case—suppose a man cooks up a formula that he figures will make the most terrific incendiary bombs in the world. Inasmuch as incendiary bombs are intended to burn buildings, how would our man better test the practicability of his formula than by actually burning some buildings with it?"

Silk and Carol seemed to be weighing the possibilities.

"It sounds very reasonable to me, Quinn!" Butch said. "Where's all this scientific stuff you want me to learn? The sooner I get my hands on the guy that's been roastin' people alive, the better I'll like it!"

Quinn produced an encyclopedia, together with several learned tomes dealing with combustibles. Book markers were carefully inserted in the proper places.

"Sit down and go to work," he invited Butch, "but remember this—I want you to get all this stuff in your head, but I want you to get it all twisted and hind foremost, so that anybody to whom you talked about it would consider you crazy."

"Huh!" Silk said. "That's no trick for Butch!"

Butch glared at Silk from red-rimmed eyes. "All I got to say, Professor Kelton, is that it's very lucky for you that I'm too doggoned tired to get up and smack you for that crack!"

CHAPTER XIV
Highway Battle

PROMPTLY at ten o'clock the next morning, Professor Kelton entered the offices of the Acme Mortgage-Servicing Company with Leonard Curland, owner of the burned warehouse.

. . . Carol Hastings, maintaining the identity of Helen Scott, stenographer, looked up without recognition.

Curland was looking at her.

"Are you Miss Scott?" he asked.

"Yes," said Carol.

"I'm sorry, I didn't recognize you at first," said Curland. "But then, I've met you only once before."

Carol smiled. "It's quite all right, Mr. Curland. Did you wish to see Mr. Dunbar?"

She escorted the two visitors into Dunbar's private sanctum, then withdrew discreetly, closing the door after her.

Curland introduced Professor Kelton to Dunbar.

"If you're not too busy, Mr. Dunbar," he suggested, "why don't we step downstairs to a restaurant for our little talk? I came away without breakfast this morning, and I could stand a cup of coffee."

There was a signal in his look that told Dunbar that what he said was more an order than a suggestion.

The three men left the office.

Over a white tablecloth they talked. Curland explained to Dunbar that Professor Kelton was interested in building model tenements, but that in order to accomplish his plans on an adequate scale, it would be necessary for him to mortgage each property he acquired before he could go on to buy the next.

Dunbar nodded gravely. He considered Professor Kelton's plan an extremely worthy one. Acme would be very happy to cooperate with him to the limit of its resources. Of course, in the present state of the mortgage market, they would be forced to ask for a bonus on any mortgage placed. For example, if Professor Kelton intended to build a fifty thousand dollar tenement on the property he had acquired for twenty-five thousand, Acme could give him a—well, say thirty-five thousand dollar mortgage on the place, but the company would require a thirty percent bonus on the transaction.

"In other words," said the Professor, "the mortgage would have a face value of thirty-five thousand dollars, but I would receive slightly less than twenty-five thousand in actual cash." He sighed.

"It seems like a lot, but I've come to the time of life where I'm more interested in doing a little good in the world than I am in my personal fortune. We can probably do business, Mr. Dunbar." He rose. "As soon as my architect has plans for the new building, I'll contact you."

The Professor left the restaurant.

"What was the idea of bringing us down here?" Dunbar demanded.

"Because I didn't like your stenographer," said Curland.

"Didn't like her? Personally, I thought she was quite a tasty dish!"

Curland glowered. "I'm not speaking of her physical attractions, Dunbar. The point is, she's not the Miss Scott who used to work for Hall! Oh, she's enough like her to be her sister, but there's one thing about her that doesn't match. Miss Scott's. eyes were blue—and this dame's eyes are brown!"

"Then—"

"That's right! She's a ringer! A spy!"

BUTCH O'BRIEN climbed the scaffolding that surrounded the first stages of construction on the new Crosstown Elevated Highway. He was still tired and his head buzzed with an accumulation of technical knowledge—or misknowledge. For two hours Tony Quinn had been coaching him in the intricacies of science.

A laborer pointed out the city engineer.

As the huge bulk of Butch approached him, Weeks looked up apprehensively from the blueprint which he held before him. Butch noted that the blueprint shook and that the city engineer's mouth twitched in a face that was pasty white.

Butch introduced himself. "...and I fool around with chemistry quite a bit now that I can't fight any more." He grinned a vacuous grin. "Guess I'm a little what they call punch-drunk." Then his face grew ardently serious. "But it don't affect my thinking any. Look, Mr. Weeks, you got a big job in this new highway, and you're gonna have to use a lot of rivets unless you use this invention of mine."

Weeks relaxed somewhat. This man was quite evidently a crank, but probably a harmless one.

"What's on your mind?" he asked.

Butch plunged into his explanation. "Well, this invention of mine makes it possible to do away with rivets. You weld the joints instead, see? You take a mixture of aluminum filings and iron oxide, and you put it on the joint you wanta weld, see? Then you ignite it with magnesium, and it makes the hottest heat you ever saw! *Fooof!* Like that—and the joint's welded! See?"

Weeks was looking at him narrowly. Butch's countenance was suffused with nothing more subtle than an apparently avid desire to make the city engineer appreciate the magnitude of his discovery.

Weeks smiled tolerantly. "It's a good idea," he admitted. "The only trouble is that your formula has been in general commercial use for a good many years. The stuff is called thermite."

Butch's face was as long as his arm. He seemed to be on the verge of weeping.

"Honest, Mr. Weeks? Then I suppose all my work has been for nothing!" He shrugged philosophically, "But I guess that's one of the hazards of scientific life!"

"I'm afraid it is."

Butch looked at the city engineer, and the small eyes took on an almost doglike respect.

"You're pretty smart, Mr. Weeks. Maybe I really could do something worthwhile someday if I could work with a man like you! Could I, Mr. Weeks? Could you let me work for you?"

"I'm afraid not."

Butch's face grew even longer. Weeks couldn't help feeling sorry for him, in a way. The approach had been good, even clever, but Weeks wasn't a complete dope!

Three very large men approached. Muscles bulged beneath their work shirts. They all looked grim. The largest of them stepped close to Weeks.

"Look, Mr. Weeks, we're the Kelly brothers to talk to you about the discharge of Al Kelly yesterday."

Weeks' face twitched. "I don't care to talk about Kelly's discharge! I do the hiring and firing on this job, and that's final! You can take your complaint about your brother and—"

"Oh, yeah?"

The large man's hand reached forth and grasped the front of Weeks' windbreaker. His other arm pulled back.

But before it could lash out, Butch went into action! All fatigue vanished from his body, and his tired eyes brightened at the prospect of bodily combat. His hamlike fist swung in a short arc and crashed against the jaw of the other.

THE man's hold on Weeks' coat relaxed. He exhaled wheezily and dropped to the planking. Butch grinned delightedly.

But the other two members of the family committee closed in. One of them threw a haymaker which Butch ducked easily, but the maneuver gave the second man time to get in a good hard right to the side of Butch's head.

Butch's brain rattled in his skull like a skeleton on a tin roof in a windstorm. But Butch didn't necessarily need a brain in order to fight—he could do very well on pure instinct.

His left flashed through the air and collided with the midriff of his nearest adversary. The man folded as neatly as a jackknife, and when his head came forward it met the devastating piston of Butch's right. He staggered backward and sat down hard, his eyes glassy.

The only remaining gladiator grew weary. He had seen his two brothers rendered *hors de combat* in astonishingly short order. Moreover, he had heard the horrid sounds of Butch's knuckles against vital bone structures. Pride would not allow him to retreat, however, so he concentrated on defending himself as best he could.

He harbored no illusions concerning his ability to whip the wavy-nosed man who now bore down upon him. His only hope was that the battle might end as quickly and as painlessly as possible.

Butch was quite willing to cooperate on that point. He measured his man, then drove out with a trip-hammer right that caught the Kelly brother flush on the correct portion of his jaw. The man went down, smiling very blissfully.

Butch turned to the engineer.

"What were you saying, Mr. Weeks?"

Weeks looked incredulously upon the three fallen knights, and then upon their vanquisher, who was blowing now upon his knuckles.

"I was saying," said Weeks, "that I can give you a job, but not as an inventor! How'd you like to be my bodyguard?"

Butch considered. "Well, a job's a job. I'll take it."

When Kenneth Weeks entered the large Sky Club

that evening, Butch was with him. Carlotta was through her routine, and when she had finished the turn, she swayed to their table. Butch sat between Weeks and Carlotta, glowering suspiciously at the girl. Carlotta seemed somewhat annoyed.

"Kenny, who is this man?" she demanded.

Weeks smiled, "He's my new bodyguard." Then, to Butch, "Why don't you run along to the bar and have a drink, Butch? This lady doesn't want to kill me—yet!"

Butch left.

"A bodyguard?" Carlotta repeated. "Why do you need a bodyguard, my Kenny?"

"Because there are likely to be people who'd like to bump me off. You see, a little invention of mine that promised to bring some nice returns has gone sour, and some of my partners are likely to be annoyed about it."

"And this—this Butch, he will protect you?"

"I'll say he will! And why? Because it's to his own interest to keep me alive—because I'm the only guy in the world outside of the United States War Department who knows a certain formula that every government in the world would give its eyeteeth to possess! If this guy who calls himself Butch O'Brien hopes to get the formula for whatever foreign power he represents, he's got to see to it that nothing happens to yours truly!"

Carlotta's eyes gleamed. "It is all very exciting, my Kenny! But if you have some secret which governments would pay to possess, why do you not sell it to them?"

Weeks shook his head slowly. "No, Carlotta. I may be a lot of things I shouldn't be, but I'm no traitor!" He smiled sardonically. "Where else but in the United States of America could some of these things be got away with?"

"I do not understand, Kenny?"

"You don't have to. And you can also keep your mouth strictly shut about what I've said about Butch!"

Meanwhile, completely unaware that the glamorous mantle of espionage had been thrown over his wide shoulders, Butch sat placidly at the bar and sipped a glass of celery tonic.

CHAPTER XV
The Menacing Voice

WORRIED, Tony Quinn glanced at his watch. At the close of each day, Carol had been reporting to him. But it was now past nine o'clock at night, and he had had no word from her. It was not like Carol.

He dialed a number. Presently, he heard the voice of Tommy Ahern.

"When did you last see Miss Scott?" Quinn demanded.

Tommy recognized the voice. "Who's this, Mr. No-name? Glad you called. This is the first chance I've had to thank you in person for that nice wedding present!"

"Never mind that! Answer my question!"

"Sure. She was in the office when I left at five o'clock."

"Who else was there?"

"The boss, Dunbar, and a guy named Curland. Anything wrong?"

"I hope not. Thanks."

Quinn hung up, chewing his knuckles thoughtfully. For the hundredth time, he considered calling Acme, and for the hundredth time he rejected the thought. If Carol were there, and alone, she would have called him. If anything was amiss, what could be gained by phoning?

Quinn strode quickly to the fireplace. A moment later he was in the secret room beyond, donning the somber clothing of the Black Bat. He slid the bolts of the two automatics to make certain they were loaded and in working order, and slipped the weapons into the holsters beneath his armpits.

The Black Bat crossed the living room swiftly and peered from a darkened window in the hall. He smiled grimly. Across the street one of McGrath's plainclothesmen still paced innocently.

The Black Bat opened the door of a closet and threw the switch on a small metal box.

The box contained a rheostatic mechanism which operated in conjunction with an electric clock. At a certain hour, this mechanism would cause the living room lights to be extinguished, and a dim nightlight would glow in the hall. After a short interval, lights would appear on the upper floor, first in bedrooms, and then in bathrooms.

At length, all lights but the one in the hall would be out. Any interested observer outside the house might reasonably assume that a blind man's valet had at last got his master and himself to bed, and that the occupants of the house were pursuing an extremely normal course of existence.

The Black Bat piloted the small coupé as swiftly as he dared through the streets of the city.

Having visited the offices of the Acme Company before, he was familiar with the terrain. He parked beneath the same lamppost on the deserted street and gazed upward. There were lights on the sixth floor, but he could not be certain that they were in the offices he planned to visit.

He drifted silently around the corner and into the alley. Again the lock yielded to his ministrations, and he drifted ghostlike up the dark stairwell. A black mask covered his face, and a strangely shaped cloak hung from his shoulders.

The Black Bat moved down the corridor of the sixth floor on rubber-soled shoes. Light glowed through the glass panel of the door to the Acme offices, making a square of light in the otherwise pitch-black hallway. The Black Bat stooped, pressed his ear against the door. He could hear voices,

"There's no use beating around the bush!" a man's voice was grating.

"You're not Helen Scott—and I want to know who you are and why you're here under that name!"

THEN, every nerve tensed in the body of the Black Bat! The voice he heard was that of Carol, incredibly weary.

"I don't know what I can tell you. You've just got some sort of crazy notion in your heads and there's nothing I can do about it!"

The Black Bat's first impulse was to break through that door, smash anybody who stood between him and the girl. But caution stayed him. It was evident that Carol had not been harmed, and so long as the men in that office with her kept talking, there was the chance that they might say something that would be of interest to the ears of the Black Bat. With an effort, he remained where he was.

Another male voice drifted through the panel.

"What's the point in arguing any longer, Dunbar? Let's take her to the house. Maybe the sea air will make her talk better."

There was a sharp edge of menace in the voice.

"Okay, sister," the Black Bat heard Dunbar say, "let's get going. And while we're in the elevator and on the way to the car, just remember that I've got a rod in my pocket, and that it'll be pointing at you all the while!"

The Black Bat steeled himself for action. When they came through the doorway into the dark hall, he would have the advantage of sight over them. It would be an easy matter to rescue Carol.

But would she want to be rescued? The thought struck him like a thunderbolt! One of the men had spoken of a place known as the House. With the possibility of being led to the very lair of the murderous gang, would Carol want to trade the opportunity for her own immediate personal safety? Knowing the girl as he did, the Black Bat thought not. If he could in some way let her know that he was here, that he would be following close behind!

The lights in the office went off, and the door opened. There was no light now, but the Black Bat could see every feature and detail of the three people who came through that door.

"That little bulb at the far end of the corridor is the elevator. Walk toward it," Curland said.

Swiftly, the Black Bat's hand darted for his armpit and came forth with a .38 automatic.

Carol, like her two companions, could see nothing. The darkness pressed in upon her like the shrouds of doom. She shivered involuntarily. For a brief moment, she had the impulse to run, to try to elude the gun she knew was trained in her direction, to find a stairway which might lead her to the street.

But she knew such a break would be dangerous in the extreme, and she had no wish to die while the riddle was yet unsolved. She had a strong desire to see the place called the House.

And then, a cry started from her throat and she had to bite her lip to keep from giving it utterance. Something cold and hard and metallic thrust itself into her hand, and her fingers closed upon it.

Had the Black Bat not been tense and troubled, the expression upon Carol's face as she clasped the automatic might have caused him to smile. It was a ludicrous mixture of surprise, relief—and amusement. Yes, even amusement over the fact that the Black Bat could be so close to the abductors without their being in the least aware of his presence!

He watched her slip the pistol into her bag. A .38 was a pretty big gun for a woman's pocketbook, but Carol luckily had a preference for bags of a copious nature.

The entire transaction was completed in so short a space of time that the party of three did not so much as pause on their groping way toward the elevator!

WHILE the others waited for the car, the Black Bat slid into the stairwell and ran swiftly down. He let himself out the back entrance. He was behind the wheel of the black coupé before Carol and the two men exited from the front door of the building.

He saw them cross the street, walk toward a long sedan which stood at the curb further down. Carol was hustled into the back seat, and one of the men got in beside her. The other man climbed behind the wheel. The Black Bat allowed the sedan to get a block underway before he set his own car in motion,

Block after block he kept that same respectful distance. He could not afford to let the others know that they were being followed, though he knew that Carol would use her very capable brain and cover as much of the back window as possible to minimize the efficacy of the sedan's rear-vision mirror.

The way led directly crosstown. In the midtown traffic, the Black Bat found it difficult to keep the other car in view without getting too close or losing it completely. He breathed more easily again as they entered the quieter streets of the East Side.

Still the sedan ploughed straight East, past First Avenue and into the teeming freight district. It turned left into Avenue C, and streaked northward.

The Black Bat turned the corner and saw his quarry still in view and still a block ahead of him.

A fast freight pounded southward on glistening tracks that paralleled the avenue. The Black Bat saw a red lantern swinging in a swift arc in the center of the roadway. The sedan passed it. The Black Bat slammed his foot down on the gas pedal. The powerful coupé leaped forward.

But it was too late! The fast freight-engine shrieked to a stop, and its impenetrable string of cars stretched out in a wide curve behind it, completely blocking the street! The Black Bat jammed on his brakes and swung the wheel over hard. The coupé's tires screamed their protest. The left front fender scraped raspingly along the side of a freight car. The man with the lantern was yelling.

The Black Bat turned the coupé in swift jerks, and roared up the side street. At the next intersection he turned north. Three blocks further on he swung back to Avenue C. The blocking freight train now lay to the rear of him, but the sedan was no longer in sight!

He cursed himself bitterly. Somehow he had let that car escape him, bearing with it the person most precious to him of all the people in the world! The man who had never experienced fear for himself now felt an overpowering sense of panic for the safety of a slip of a blond girl. He had been a fool to let them leave that office. If anything now happened to Carol, the blame would rest upon him, and it was a blame that he thought he could not bear.

Then confidence oozed slowly back into his frame. Carol was a smart girl, and a plucky one. And she had a .38 pistol in her handbag.

THE sedan crossed the river bridge and left the city behind. Carol made mental notes of the route they followed. After some time, the houses thinned out.

"Okay, sister," Curland said, "down on the floor. From now on you travel blind."

Carol slid to the floor, and Curland spread a robe over her.

It would be almost ridiculously easy, she thought, to take the gun from her bag and blast her way to freedom. They had searched that bag for firearms before they left the office, and could now have no suspicion that she was armed, A quick shot would finish Curland, and the hard muzzle of the gun against the back of Dunbar's neck would make him reasonable enough.

Still, she made no effort to escape. She knew that the Black Bat was following, though she had not been able to risk a reassuring look from the rear window of the car. But she had seen the familiar black coupé at the curb as she climbed into the sedan. And the gun in her handbag would be as valuable as an ace-in-the-hole later as now.

Carol Hastings wanted to see the House, and she wanted to lead the Black Bat to it. Therefore, she stifled uncomplainingly beneath the musty folds of the blanket.

At last the car stopped. Dunbar got out of the driver's seat and tied a handkerchief around Carol's eyes.

"Okay—get out!"

She could hear the soft rolling of surf upon a sandy beach, and the odor of salt was in her nostrils. Apparently the House laced the broad sweep of the Atlantic, a shoreline virtually deserted at this season of the year.

Carol was led up some steps, and through a door. Presently, she heard a voice as cold as wintered steel.

"What's this? We don't go in for weekend parties here, you know."

Dunbar's voice was respectful as he answered.

"This girl's a snooper, Boss. She was in the office posing as the girl who used to work for Hall. She won't talk, so we thought we'd better bring her here."

"You did right," the cold voice said. "If she knows anything, we can find ways to make her talk." He paused. "Ways to make her talk about, perhaps—the Black Bat!"

Carol's expression did not change, and the voice went on.

"On the other hand, if she knows nothing, it is merely her misfortune to have got in the way."

There was something so deadly in the voice that a shiver danced the length of Carol's spine. Her left hand gripped the handbag. She thought she would like to see the face behind that voice, see the man who gave the orders to this murderous gang.

Her free hand darted to the handkerchief about her eyes, but before her fingers could pluck it free a fist lashed against the side of her head. Everything went dizzily black.

When Carol recovered consciousness, she was in a small upstairs room with the windows barred. She got painfully to her feet and staggered to the door. It was locked. Then, suddenly, apprehensively, her eyes darted about the room.

The handbag and the gun were—missing!

CHAPTER XVI
McGrath Outwitted

GRAVELY, the Black Bat turned the coupé homeward. Perhaps there would be some further word from Silk, or from Butch. Butch had found a moment to call Tony Quinn earlier in the day to inform him that he had

become Kenneth Weeks' bodyguard. Silk had also called to tell of his conversation with Dunbar and Curland—the very men who had abducted Carol! If they had made a later appointment with the Professor, it might be that the Black Bat could again get within striking distance of them!

He switched on the forbidden shortwave radio beneath the dashboard of the car. The nasal, metallic voice of the police announcer came in. Routine stuff. Car so-and-so return to your station, car such-and-such go to such a point—a drunk annoying pedestrians.

The Black Bat reached for the switch again, but just as he was about to cut the voice from the air it blared out with the more electrifying—"Attention all cars!"

The Black Bat listened—"Attention all cars! Tenement fire at six-sixteen East Seventy-seventh! Large crowd gathering! Proceed at once!"

The black coupé turned and hammered for 616 East 77th street. In five minutes, the Black Bat slid the car to the curb a block away from the tortuous flames that marked the death of another building—and heaven knows how many people!

He pulled the brim of his hat low over his scarred eyes, and the upturned collar of a black topcoat hid most of the remainder of his face from view. He stepped out of the car and moved with the gathering crowd toward the firelines.

Powerful streams from a score of hoses hurled themselves hissing into the maelstrom of fire, but it was apparent that there could be no hope for the building. Other nozzles jetted their drenching spume over adjoining structures. If that fire got out of hand, spread to other properties, there was no telling where the conflagration would cease.

Two white-coated ambulance surgeons bent over huddled forms upon the sidewalk. The Black Bat moved closer. One of the interns stood up, and a shudder seemed to pass over his body. He turned to the policeman who stood grimly by.

"No use," he said. "They got the fire in their lungs! And God knows how many other poor wretches are cooking in that hell!"

This blaze was just as typical as the three which had proceeded it. The tenement had burst spontaneously into all-enveloping flames—flames from which no living thing could hope to emerge alive.

The Black Bat listened to those around him, and to the cadence of the crowd as a whole. The sustained murmur of many voices struck a note of horror and hate—horror at what had happened, and hate against those who had perpetrated this fresh outrage.

For a week the yellow press had been screaming for vengeance, and the lust hid spread to the populace of the tenement neighborhoods.

The Black Bat was certain that if the criminals could be delivered into the hands of this growling mob, they would be torn literally to bloody bits. And he thought that such a fate would not be too horrible a one to be visited upon them.

And it was these same fiends in whose hands the fate of Carol now lay! The thought sickened him, brought beads of cold perspiration to his forehead. If they were capable of the mass murder of innocent tenement dwellers, what mercy would they show a single girl, particularly if they considered that girl a menace to their evil plannings? The Black Bat breathed a silent prayer that the .38 automatic in the girl's bag might shield her from harm.

Lieutenant McGrath brushed past the Black Bat, so close that their shoulders touched. He stepped over the rope which held back the crowd, and paused beside another police officer in plainclothes.

"Come on, Engle, we're going to see a man. I had a check made, and I've got the name and address of the owner of this building. There may be nothing to it, but I want to see him!"

The two detectives climbed back over the rope and burrowed their way through the masses of people. The Black Bat followed. He had been wishing violently that he knew the owner, or ostensible owner of the property, for that person might be forced into revealing those higher up in the complicated criminal structure, might even be coerced into telling the location of the place known as the House. And in the house was Carol!

McGrath and his men climbed into a police squad car. The uniformed policeman at the wheel set it in motion. The Black Bat sprinted for the coupé , spinning people like tenpins from his path, heedless of the shouts that were hurled at him. The car was in gear and rolling forward even before he had closed the door.

He was not worried about following the police car too closely. He was well aware of the fact that the police are not in the habit of being tailed, and therefore do not expect to be.

The squad car proceeded north for perhaps twenty blocks and turned into a street lined with brownstone-front houses of almost identical appearance. It slowed, and ultimately stopped before one of these houses. McGrath and the other detective got out and began looking closely at the dim house numbers. The uniformed driver remained at the wheel.

The Black Bat stopped his own car a half block away. He alighted and drifted casually down the street. As he passed the squad car, McGrath and his man were already at the door of the house they sought. The Black Bat continued unobtrusively on his way.

Almost at the end of the street, he came to an apartment house. There was a cellar entrance, and he surmised that this entrance would give him access to the backyard and the other yards with which it connected. He ducked as swiftly and as silently as a shadow into the gloom of the cellarway.

There, he paused for a moment to don the mask and cloak. He loosened the one remaining automatic in its holster beneath his left armpit. Then he moved surefootedly through the inky blackness of the cellar, his lips set in a hard, grim smile.

The immediate intention of the Black Bat was to kidnap a witness from the very hands of the police! It was a risky business, especially when McGrath was one of the policemen involved, but no more risky than the adventure into which Carol Hastings had allowed herself to be drawn.

The Black Bat moved through the dim backyards. There were fences separating most of the areas, and these he vaulted easily and silently. He counted each house upon the way.

At the thirteenth house he stopped. Thirteen. Was there any significance in the number? Was this some sort of warning from the god of chance that the luck of the Black Bat was running out? Would this prove to be the occasion upon which the Black Bat would engage McGrath in a battle of wits once too often? If anything were to happen to him, it would leave Carol at the mercy of those who held her, for he was the only person who so much as knew of her abduction.

"Rot!" he told himself. "You're shying at shadows!"

The door which gave onto the ground floor of the house was no match for the Black Bat's magnetic keys. In less than thirty seconds he was inside, moving cautiously toward the front of the place. The floor on which he found himself contained only kitchen, serving pantry and dining room. The living and sleeping rooms were on the floors above.

HE listened at the stairs. He heard the voices of the two detectives, and the whining voice of a third man.

"How could I know the place was burning? I have no telephone!" the thin voice was saying.

And McGrath's sarcastic voice:

"And I suppose you have no insurance on that place that's burnin'! Come along, now, get into your clothes. I want you to see the fire, and I may want to take you to Headquarters!"

"Wait here," said the man in his whining voice. "I'll go upstairs and dress."

"We'll go along,' McGrath said. "I lost a smart guy once on that gag. That was back in 1909, and it isn't due to happen again until nineteen seventy-nine!"

There were sounds of three pairs of feet climbing a flight of stairs, and as they went a floor higher, so did the Black Bat. Again, he listened. He could hear the whiny-voiced man complaining bitterly about honest people being routed from their beds in the middle of the night by overbearing policemen.

It would be humorous, the Black Bat thought, if this man really were an honest man. It would make these efforts on the part of McGrath and the Black Bat pretty ludicrous!

The stairs to the bedroom floor were dim, lighted only by a dull nightlight. The Black Bat moved slowly upward. His feet seemed to know instinctively which boards would creak, and these he avoided. Presently, he was directly beneath the nightlight, which hung on its own wire from a wall bracket.

From his pocket, the Black Bat drew a knife. His thumb flicked open the razor-edged blade. He reached for the wire of the light, bent it into a loop. He inserted the blade in the loop, and exerted pressure. There was a flash as the wire shorted, and a shower of blue sparks from the fused steel of the knifeblade.

One sharp jolt of electricity jerked through the Black Bat's body, and then every light in the place went out.

He heard McGrath's explosive, "What the hell!" and the other detective's, "It's all right, I've got my hand on his shoulder. Are you dressed, you?"

The whiny-voiced man was.

"Okay," said McGrath, "down the stairs with you, and no funny business! It still doesn't seem like pure chance that would blow a fuse just at a time like this!"

The heavy footsteps approached and then, through the darkness, the Black Bat could see the three men. The whiny-voiced man was small, he noted with satisfaction. That would make him easier to get away with.

The Black Bat backed silently down the stairs while the others clattered stumblingly on their way. At the parlor floor, he stopped again, and his right hand reached for the automatic. As the two policemen and their prisoner reached the last step, the Black Bat spoke, and his voice was low and even and deadly—if somewhat out of character.

"All right, coppers!" he snarled. "Stand still and don't reach!" McGrath's hand crept toward his pocket, and the barrel of the Black Bat's .38 crashed on his forearm. "I said don't reach!"

It was almost funny to see the three sets of eyes trying to bore through the darkness. He reached out and drew the little man from between the two officers.

"Okay, coppers," he said, "turn left and march!"

McGrath and the other plainclothesman were both old-timers. They knew the futility of battling against odds. Better to wait for a new break than try to make a good one from a bad!

THE Black Bat herded the policemen into a closet and locked the door on them. But just before doing so, he dropped a small article into the loose pocket of McGrath's coat. It would be a pity to have a brush with the great McGrath and not leave the mark of the Black Bat somewhere on his person!

"Who are you?" the whiny voice was asking. "You must be new to the mob—but good work anyway! And how the hell do you see in the dark?"

"Never mind that!" said the Black Bat. "Start down for the front basement entrance!"

He could see the little man picking his way carefully down the dark stairs. The Black Bat opened the front door to the merest crack. From his pocket he produced a round object such as he had found useful on the occasion of his entry into Amos Willard's apartment. He flicked the small lever that fitted flush with its surface, and placed the round object upon the floor of the hall. Then he ran for the stairs, hurrying his man before him.

In the car, the uniformed policeman was wondering what was keeping the two plainclothesmen. When the lights had gone out, he had expected them to emerge almost immediately. But now, glancing at the door at the top of the high stoop, he saw thick clouds of smoke pouring out. With a curse, he was out of the car.

From his vantage point at the door on the basement floor, the Black Bat saw the young patrolman legging it for the stoop. He opened the basement door and took the arm of the whiny-voiced man.

"Let's go!" he growled.

In the comparative light of the street, the man looked at his deliverer, stopped dead in his tracks.

"The Black Bat!" he cried.

"The same! But let's go anyway!"

He dragged the little man protestingly after him For a moment be paused to lift the hood of the police car and yank at the wire beneath. Then the Black Bat and his trembling captive legged it toward the coupé farther down the street.

By the time the police came out of that house and started slinging ineffectual lead in the general direction of the two fugitives, the black coupé was rolling smoothly on its way. One of the fugitives was jubilant. The other was the most unhappy man imaginable.

"Please," he begged, "please take me back to them cops!"

CHAPTER XVII
The Mystery of Carlotta

LAZILY, Butch O'Brien sipped his fourth successive celery tonic at the bar of the Sky Club. But across the rim of the glass, his eyes watched Kenneth Weeks in conversation with the dancer.

At last, the couple rose and walked toward the door which gave access to the stairs leading to the gambling room on the upper floor. Butch slid from the bar stool and followed. He noted that the glance which Carlotta now bestowed upon him lacked some of its earlier enmity. The glance held, rather, a subtle quality of respect. Butch wondered why.

Weeks went directly to a roulette table, and started play with his usual hundred-dollar stack of chips. Butch stood beside Carlotta, watching him toss the chips expertly onto the layout. Presently, Butch became aware of a beefy person attempting to get close enough to the table to watch the play. Butch moved over a few inches.

"Thanks," said Big Jim Morley.

He grinned at Butch in friendly fashion.

"That's okay," said Butch.

After a minute or so, Morley spoke again.

"You don't play?" he asked.

Butch shook his head. "Nope. I just watch."

The wheel spun. The little ivory ball clicked into a slot, and the croupier pushed a pile of chips toward Weeks. Weeks' eyes were bright, and his nostrils flared with excitement. Butch almost felt sorry for him. It was always rather pathetic to view the excitement of a confirmed gambler while the goddess of chance was smiling her temporary smile upon him. For Weeks, nothing existed except the roulette wheel, the croupier and himself.

There was a low, sharp exclamation of pain from Carlotta. She lunged sideways, rubbing one bare shoulder with her other hand.

Big Jim Morley was extremely apologetic.

"I'm terribly sorry! I'm afraid I let my cigar touch your arm. I hope you'll forgive me!"

Carlotta was glaring at him, and anger smoldered in her dark eyes. She seemed to be debating whether the burn had been purely accidental.

"It's all right," she said at last.

Morley was smiling.

"I'm glad you're not angry," he said. "And to show you I'm truly sorry, I'd like to buy you a drink, if I may."

"No thank you," said Carlotta. "I am with Mr. Weeks."

Her voice was almost prim, and primness was the last thing one would expect to encounter in Carlotta.

Morley laughed quietly. "He doesn't even *know* you're with him! Come on, have a drink with me."

Somehow, Butch was between Morley and the girl, and Morley had been forced unobtrusively back a few steps.

"Let's let it go at that," said Butch softly.

Morley's brows went up. "Just where do you fit into the picture, my meddling friend?"

"I take care of Weeks, is all," Butch said.

"And that includes taking care of his women?" asked Morley.

Butch shrugged. "I've never had any orders to that effect, but I've never had any orders to the opposite effect, either. So, in the meantime, I just protect his interests!"

Morley was smiling broadly.

"Good! Fine! That's the sort of loyalty I like to see! I can see that Weeks has nothing to worry about with you on the job!"

He fished a thick roll of bills from his pocket and peeled off a twenty. This he handed to Butch.

"For your trouble," he said.

Butch tore the bill into tiny pieces and stuffed the fragments into Morley's breast pocket.

"Some night, when you haven't anything to do," he said, "you might put those pieces together again."

MORLEY was still smiling. For a long moment he looked at Butch. Then he turned and walked off, leaving the place.

Weeks was doing all right. Within a half hour he was seven hundred dollars ahead. He was flushed with excitement.

"Lady Luck's done an about-face!" he said to Carlotta. "This is the first night in God-knows-when that the numbers have come up for me!"

But Butch was still staring covertly at Carlotta. He was wondering whether or not it had been his own imagination that had seen some significance in a look Carlotta had thrown to the croupier, and in the almost imperceptible nod which the croupier returned.

"And I'm going to push the old luck while it holds!" Weeks was saying to the girl. "I'm going to have a crack at one of the higher limit tables."

Carlotta gave his arm a fond squeeze.

"All right, my Kenny. I must go down and change for my next show, and when it is over, I will come up again."

The girl moved off, swaying her hips. Weeks moved to another roulette table at which the play was for higher stakes. Butch was close behind him, but his eyes followed Carlotta until the door closed after her.

"Five hundred," Weeks said to the dealer, and, as the man's brows went up, "Don't worry, I'm playing for cash tonight!"

He slid a little pile of currency across the table. A moment later he was completely engrossed by his gambling.

Butch drifted unobtrusively away. Weeks wouldn't know or care where he was, and Butch had a yen to follow the dark-haired dancer, There was nothing personal or romantic connected with his interest in her. He just wanted to see what she did and said when she wasn't in the company of Kenneth Weeks.

Downstairs, Butch's eyes swept the club for Carlotta. She was not in sight. Probably doing exactly what she said she was going to do, changing her costume for the next show. Butch circled the room, now filled with a dancing, drinking, noisy crowd. The orchestra was giving out with great blasts from the brass section.

At the door which served as entrance and exit for the members of the floorshow, he paused. Then, he stepped through. The trumpet player winked at him lasciviously, and Butch winked back. Apparently, it was not forbidden for an occasional patron to enter the dressing rooms.

Inside, Butch lowered his eyes modestly as a sketchily-attired chorus girl stepped from a side room into the hall. She looked at him.

"Well, what d'you want, Tall and Handsome?" she demanded.

"I'm looking for Carlotta," Butch admitted, his eyes still averted.

The girl snorted. "That high-falutin' Spanish dame is too fancy to use the same dressing room as the rest of us!" The girl's thumb jerked. "Try the door at the end."

"Thanks," said Butch.

The door indicated, he saw, had a small star upon it. He knocked. He didn't know exactly what he was going to say if she answered, but it was Butch's practice to act first and worry about the conversation afterwards.

There was no answer. He tried again, then cautiously turned the knob. Butch's small eyes took in the contents of the tiny dressing room, but Carlotta was not part of the contents.

HE LEFT the dressing rooms and strolled again around the edge of the supper room. Where in hell had Carlotta gone to? She had said she was going to change for her next show, but she wasn't changing. Why did she have to lie to her boyfriend about a simple thing like that? The natural assumption was that she was doing a little two-timing.

Butch remembered the swift glance that had passed between Carlotta and the croupier at the roulette layout. If she had the prerogative of telling the dealers when a customer should and should not win, it was natural to assume that she was on a highly friendly footing with the management of the

place. What, then, could be more natural than for her to be making a report of some kind to the establishment's manager?

Butch sidled toward the door marked "private." For a moment, he stood with his back to it, his hand turning the knob. For a man of his bulk, Butch went through the door in a manner most unostentatious.

He found himself in a small alcove, on the far side of which was another door. He placed his ear against the panel of this door. From within came the unmistakably Latin voice of Carlotta, and because there was no answering voice, Butch assumed that she was talking over the telephone. The only trouble was that he couldn't quite catch what she was saying.

A more cautious man would have cursed his luck and let it go at that, But Butch was not overburdened with caution. His present desire was to hear what Carlotta was saying, and the only way to accomplish that was to open the door.

CHAPTER XVIII
Death and a Lost Hope

ELUSIVE Carlotta was behind the desk in Legs Landers' office. She had a French phone in her hand. Another phone rested quietly in its cradle upon the desk. Why two phones, Butch wondered, but he cleared his brain of empty wonderings to concentrate upon what the dark-haired girl was saying.

"Yes, Landers is out. I thought you would like to know that Weeks has a bodyguard now." Carlotta paused to snort impatiently. "No, not an ordinary bodyguard. Weeks says the man is a spy, a real international spy, who wants to get the formula for the incendiary stuff! And Weeks is too much of an American to sell such a secret to a foreign government! Is that not funny?"

A bee was buzzing in Butch's head.

"She means me!" he told himself. "They think I'm a spy!"

The idea was so amusing that Butch could scarcely restrain the guffaw that rose in his throat to strangle him.

Apparently Carlotta was being given detailed instructions by whoever held the other end of the wire, for she was listening intently.

"Yes... yes... yes... I understand," she said. "Goodbye."

Butch closed the door quickly but silently. In a single stride, he was across the foyer and out the other door. When Carlotta came out he was wandering aimlessly about the supper room. Carlotta went directly to the other end of the room, and disappeared into the dressing quarters.

Butch found a pay telephone and dropped a nickel into the slot. He dialed an unlisted number which connected by direct wire with the home of Tony Quinn.

The Black Bat piloted his small car by a devious route until he had almost gained the gate house. Then, he pulled to the curb and stopped.

The little man on the seat beside him was still whimpering with fear.

"Let me go! You got no right to do this to me! Let me go, I say!"

His hand pressed on the door handle. "No use," said the Black Bat. "I took the precaution to lock it." He half turned in his seat, facing the small man. "You've got one more chance to talk. Who do you take your orders from?"

"I don't know what you're talking about!" the man whined.

The Black Bat opened the car's glove compartment and drew forth a roll of two-inch adhesive tape. The tape made a ripping sound as he jerked it from the spool.

The little man's eyes widened. "What are you going to do?"

The Black Bat ignored the question.

"There's a house somewhere at the shore. I want to know where that house is. Either you're going to tell me, or you're not going to do any talking at all. You're not going to do any seeing, either. What'll it be? Quick! We can't stay here forever!"

The captive's mouth hung open, and his breath came in rasping jerks from his constricted throat. The pupils of his eyes were dilated, staring at the inexorable black presence beside him. His voice was a thin, reedy murmur.

"He'd kill me if I told you!"

The Black Bat reached forth one hand and gripped the man's shirt shaking him as a terrier might shake a rat

"Talk, damn you!"

The little man's lean fingers clawed ineffectually at the steel clamp at his throat.

"I'll talk—I'll talk!"

The Black Bat's grip relaxed ever so slightly.

The little man tried to moisten his lips with a tongue equally as dry.

"The House is... The House is at..."

The words gurgled to nothingness. His breath hissed from his lungs, and the little man slumped into himself, his eyes stared glassily.

Swiftly, the Black Bat's hand darted beneath the other's coat and thence to the thin wrist. Had he literally scared the man to death? A faint pulse reassured him, but the pulse was weak and uneven. The captive had suffered a heart attack, there was no doubt about it.

THE Black Bat, who only a moment before had hated this miserable creature along with all denizens of the underworld, now became solicitous in the extreme. He must not let him die! He must make him recover sufficiently to finish the sentence he had started to utter. He must keep that faint heartbeat alive in the sack of bones, for locked behind the little man's lips was the secret of the whereabouts of the House—and Carol Hastings.

The dark coupé rolled several blocks further on its way. The Black Bat parked it nearer to the gate house entrance than was his general practice. He couldn't go the whole length of a block with a body slung over his shoulder like a sack of grain.

He lifted the unconscious man from the car and flitted into the door of the gate house with the easy burden. Through the pitch darkness of the tunnel, the Black Bat moved with sure steps. Halfway through the tunnel, he stopped before an iron-grilled door. Beyond the door was a cell-like room, furnished simply with great care to cleanliness.

It had been constructed a long time ago against any occasion upon which it might be convenient to harbor a guest without either the rest of the world or the guest himself knowing a great deal about his whereabouts. The room had never before been occupied.

The Black Bat lowered his burden to the iron bed which stood against the wall. He loosened the man's clothing, and rubbed his wrists and face vigorously. At length, he was rewarded by a more discernable heart action, and by a return of color to the patient's face.

Yet, the man did not return to consciousness. He seemed to be embarking upon the early stages of a long, restful sleep. His captor watched him with annoyance and impatience. There was no help for it. He'd simply have to wait until the little man's condition improved sufficiently to make further questioning possible.

A red light blinked in the tunnel, signaling a call on the private telephone in the small room behind the fireplace. The Black Bat bestowed one more glance at his guest, then left the cell. Moments later, he was through the trapdoor and into the secret room. He lifted the telephone from its cradle.

Butch's voice drifted across the wire. Tony Quinn listened attentively as the former pugilist made his report.

"Good work, Butch!" he said at last. "The idea of their thinking you're a spy isn't as silly as it seems to you. Your cue is to play that angle for all it's worth, if you get a chance. Besides that you've proved beyond a doubt that Weeks is the man who filed the patent for the incendiary bombs. Whoever the girl talked to over that telephone knows about the formula, too, and will probably make an attempt to do business with you if you can struggle along on that spy angle. Butch, the man on the other end of that wire is the man we want—I'm sure of it! And we've got to find out who he is and where he is in a hurry, because he's got Carol!"

He could hear the explosive exclamation from Butch's mouth.

"Carol? My God, Quinn!"

"Exactly. I'm working on a visitor who may be able to give me a lead in that direction, but if you get information first, get in touch with me. I'll stay by the phone as long as I can."

The Black Bat's voice was crisp and businesslike, but Butch could sense the overtone of deep concern.

Quinn hung up, and stepped down again into the darkness of the tunnel His strange eyes pierced the thick gloom as though it did not exist. The rubber-soled shoes made no sound on the stone flooring.

HALFWAY down the tunnel, he turned to enter the cell-like room, and paused at once. The sight which greeted his eyes was both surprising and, somehow, amusing.

The bed was vacant, and its late occupant now stood against the far wall, his eyes straining against the complete darkness. And in the little man's hands, raised high over his head, was the only piece of portable furniture in the place, a steel chair.

It was apparently his intention to await the return of his captor and to crush his skull with one blow of that heavy chair. Somebody would pay well, no doubt, for the death of the Black Bat! Well enough, even, to inculcate murder into the heart of so miserable a specimen as this skinny little man.

Yet the Black Bat could not help but admire the other's histrionic ability—and the heart attack must have been pure acting.

He spoke quietly, but the little man all but jumped to the ceiling.

"Put it down," said the Black Bat.

The wide eyes of the pallid face stared in the direction of the voice. For a moment a sort of bravado shone in those eyes.

"You're bluffing," he said hoarsely. "You can't see me any more than I can see you!"

"You've just taken one step forward on your left foot," was the answer. "Now I'm telling you to stand still and put down that chair!"

The look of bravado washed off the little man's face, to be replaced by an expression of superstitious horror. His mouth worked dryly before he could force himself to speak again, and now his voice was scarcely audible.

"What sort of thing are you?" he breathed. "No living man has eyes that could see through this darkness!"

With a hoarse cry the little man hurled the chair

with the desperation of panic. The Black Bat stepped easily aside and the chair tangled in the door of the cell. But the prisoner hurled himself forward, too, his bony fingers clawing wildly at the air.

The Black Bat made no effort to step aside this time, and the other crashed into him. There was an hysterical gurgling note in the man's throat, and his whole body seemed to shrink as though it had come into contact with something unnatural. The clawing fingers scurried up the Black Bat's chest and clamped on his throat. And there was more strength in those fingers than might have been expected in so small a man.

The Black Bat could, of course, hurl the little man away from him with one thrust of his powerful arm, but he could take no chances on disabling his opponent. Instead, he closed his own hands about the man's throat and exerted pressure. When the little chap had had enough, he would relax and be reasonable.

But the little chap apparently had no intention of relaxing. He had quite evidently given himself up, and was determined to accomplish but one thing—to take the Black Bat with him on the one-way journey into the unknown. His fingers bit deeper.

The Black Bat knew that he was the stronger of the two, and that in any ordinary combat the little man would be of little more annoyance than a mosquito. He also knew, however, that psychopathics are sometimes imbued with a strength far above the norm, and his present antagonist was unquestionably frightened to the point of insanity. The Black Bat relaxed his own stranglehold and, placing his hands against the other's chest, catapulted the little man across the room.

The man's left leg collided with the leg of the iron bed, and the thin body pinwheeled over backwards. There was a flat, sickening thud as his head struck the stone floor, and almost at once a trickle of blood showed darkly.

Swiftly the Black Bat bent. This time there was no heartbeat, no pulse. He turned the light figure over. The back of the skull was split.

The little man was dead—and with him all present hope of discovering the whereabouts of the mysterious House—of Carol!

CHAPTER XIX
Predicament Extraordinary

IMPERTURBALLY playing the role of Professor Kelton, Silk Kirby sat in his pleasant apartment on the Drive playing his one hundred and eighth game of solitaire Canfield.

With a disgusted grunt he scattered the cards to the four corners of the room. He crossed to a table which held a telephone, and called Tony Quinn's private number.

He had been calling the number at intervals all through the evening and there had been no answer. That in itself was disquieting. Quinn and the others of his little band were out in the world doing something, while he sat about listening to the hardening of his arteries.

Silk held the phone for a long time, and was on the verge of hanging up when the crisp voice of Tony Quinn floated to him across the miles.

"Yes?"

"This is Professor Kelton. I've been trying to get you all evening."

Quinn quickly told him of the events of the evening, ending with the news that Carol was in the hands of the enemy.

Silk experienced a strange tightness, a coldness about his heart, and his hand gripped the instrument until the knuckles showed white through the taut skin.

"Isn't there anything I can do, sir?"

"I'm afraid not. Butch may turn up a clue. I thought I'd be able to do something myself, but now all I've got on my hands is a dead man!"

"What are you going to do with him, sir?"

"I'm going to present him to somebody, and let that somebody worry about what to do with him! In the meantime, Silk, hold your fort."

There was a click, and the line went dead. Silk replaced the instrument in its cradle and started to pick up the scattered cards.

The house telephone rang, and Silk was informed that there was a Mr. Dunbar in the lobby.

"Send him up!" said Silk, a happy gleam in his eyes.

A surge of jubilation went through him. Dunbar was one of the men who had abducted Carol. Therefore, he must know Carol's whereabouts! Silk was determined to discover where she was being held, and to free her from the grip of the murderers.

Professor Kelton opened the door to Paul Dunbar.

"I hardly expected to be seeing you so soon again, Mr. Dunbar."

Dunbar declined a cigar and sank into a deep chair.

"I'm sorry to disturb you at such an hour, Professor, but I've got a deal in which I think you might be interested, and it has to be made quickly, if at all."

Silk smiled inwardly. The crooks must be getting worried if they wanted to liquidate their holdings in so much of a hurry.

"Of course," Dunbar went on, "we can arrange mortgages on the properties for you, so that your

cash outlay will not have to be too great."

"At the usual discounts, I suppose?"

Dunbar nodded curtly. "I realize that the deal doesn't seem the best in the world for you, Professor Kelton, because of course the face value of the mortgages won't represent the cash they'll bring you. On the other hand, if you intend building model tenements on the sites of the present properties, the increased values will more than offset your original paper loss.

"And on top of that, you've said yourself that you're more interested in the philanthropic than in the personal financial angle."

He's making it all sound very fine and upright, even almost reasonable, thought Silk.

"That's correct, Mr. Dunbar, entirely correct," he said. "What little good we can do in this world, you know—" Professor Kelton spread his hands significantly.

"Naturally," agreed Dunbar. "I feel that the least Acme can do is to cooperate with you to the fullest possible extent!"

"Thank you, sir. I appreciate your helpfulness. If you can supply me with the addresses and descriptions of the properties, I can go over the information tonight, and tomorrow I'll call at your office and you can show me the actual buildings."

Dunbar drew a thin sheaf of papers from his breast pocket, tossed them on the table.

"These will locate and describe the properties, but I'm afraid any business meetings we may have in the future will have to take place here, or across the dinner table in some public place. You see, we've closed our offices."

The surprise which showed on the countenance of Professor Kelton was not entirely fictitious.

"Closing your office? Why on Earth?"

Dunbar shrugged. "The usual reason, We're not making much money. We've liquidated as far as possible, and the little we still have doesn't warrant maintaining an expensive suite of offices."

"I see." Professor Kelton looked thoughtful. "It always grieves me to hear of a business ceasing to exist—people losing their positions, landlords losing tenants, telephone companies losing subscribers. It widens out, you see."

"True," admitted Dunbar sadly.

"Take your little office staff, for example," Professor Kelton pursued. "What will become of them?"

He watched the other's face closely.

Dunbar sighed, and his expression was one of interested concern.

"I hope they'll be able to find new positions. They're both efficient workers, and to tide them over for the present, I gave them each a month's salary upon dismissal."

"Very generous of you," said the Professor. Then, as though a sudden thought had struck him, "As a matter of fact, if I'm to go into business on a rather large scale, I shall be needing a staff myself. If you could give me their addresses—"

"I don't happen to have their addresses with me," Dunbar said easily, "but I'll look them up before we meet tomorrow. I needn't tell you how pleased I am that you're interested in taking over my former staff." He rose. "Well, it's quite late. I must be getting along. If you'll look over the papers and try to reach a decision tonight, we may be able to close the deal tomorrow. I'll get in touch with you."

AT the door, Dunbar paused. "Oh yes, I'd suggest that you make arrangements to consummate the deal in cash, Professor Kelton."

"In cash? Isn't that a bit unusual?"

"Very. But you see, we've closed our books, made out our tax report, and all that sort of thing. We'd like to keep the transaction as simple as possible. However, if you have any objections—"

"None! None at all!" Professor Kelton hastened to say. "So long as the deeds are in order, I have no objection to dealing in cash."

The door closed after Dunbar, and immediately Silk gave visible indication of the mental turmoil he had been undergoing for the past few minutes. He paced the length of the room, wondering if any man had ever been called upon to make a decision like the one which now confronted him—and to make it so quickly.

Dunbar had given him a list of addresses which he knew were of vital importance. He had a hunch that Tony Quinn would want to waste no time in plotting those addresses on the map of the city which covered the top of his desk. He had to get those addresses to Quinn—and yet, he had to follow Dunbar. He had to get some inkling of where Carol was being held!

He seized the house telephone.

"Has Mr. Dunbar come out of the elevator yet?"

"He's just stepped into the lobby at this moment, sir,"

"Good!" said Silk. "Ask him to step upstairs again, please?"

Silk hung up and reached for the outside phone. He called Tony Quinn's private number but, as he had feared, there was no answer.

"Out getting rid of a stiff!" Silk groaned.

He had only a moment before Dunbar would again be at the door. He grabbed a pencil and a piece of paper, and jotted furiously. Next he addressed an envelope. He was just sealing the paper into the envelope when Dunbar's knock sounded.

Silk slipped the envelope into his pocket and went to the door. He greeted Dunbar with a bland, apologetic smile.

"Sorry to have brought you up again on a wild goose chase, Dunbar. There was something about one of those papers that I didn't understand at first glance. Very stupid of me, but I think I've got it straight now. I'll ride down with you. Got a letter I want to drop at the desk."

They said another good night in the lobby of the apartment, and Dunbar went out. Silk crossed to the desk and gave the clerk the envelope he had lately addressed.

"Call a messenger," he instructed, "and have him deliver this. Tell him he's to wait on that doorstep all night if necessary, ringing the doorbell every five minutes."

"But, sir," the clerk slid, "if there's nobody at home when he first rings. What—"

"Don't argue," said Silk. "Just do as you're told!"

Professor Kelton legged it up the street with an agility and speed surprising in a man of his apparent age. At the corner was a taxicab stand, and into the foremost hack the Professor climbed.

"In a moment," he told the driver, "I believe there will be a car appearing at the next corner, headed east. When it passes the corner," Silk told the cabby, "I want you to follow it unobtrusively, and at a safe distance."

"Look," said the driver. "There's always somethin' fishy about that 'follow-that-other-car' gag. I ain't gonna do it."

Silk sighed. "People are always arguing with me tonight!" He reached a hand into his trousers pocket, and it came forth with a ten dollar bill. He handed the note to the driver. "Would that make any difference?"

"Yes, sir! Exactly ten dollars worth!"

"Okay, get going. There's your car!" The taxi rolled.

WHEN Butch returned to the gambling room, he found that most of Weeks' seven hundred dollars profit from the other table had disappeared in the more expensive game. Just as though he had been standing behind his employer all the while, he tapped his arm.

"Look, Weeks, why don't you take what's left of that dough and get back to the other game?" he asked.

Weeks tuned bloodshot eyes upon him.

"And why don't you mind your own business?" he snapped.

"I'm your bodyguard, ain't I?" Butch demanded. "Well, then, when I bodyguard I do a complete job, including the bankroll. The dealer at that other table's got kinder eyes than this guy. Come on."

Weeks complied, more out of amusement than for any other reason. And when he had picked up some of his lost profits at the lower-priced table he turned to Butch with a grin.

"Maybe you're a hunch, Butch!" Weeks said.

"Sure," said Butch.

Carlotta weaved her way toward them, looking gorgeous in her darkly brittle way, and attired in a silver fox cloak that looked as though it cost more than her salary. She had done her last show of the evening and was apparently ready to leave the place.

She hooked an arm though Weeks' and smiled through lowered lashes at Butch.

"Kenny is going to take me away from here," she told the big man coyly, "so you will have the rest of the evening to yourself."

"When it's gone two o'clock in the morning," Butch said, "there ain't much of the evening left, strictly speaking. Besides, where Weeks goes, I go."

Carlotta looked extremely pained.

"Everywhere?" she asked. Then, to Weeks: "How can that be so, my Kenny?"

Weeks looked down at her, grinning. "Don't worry, Carlotta. I'll give him the rest of the evening off, as you suggested."

Butch shrugged. "It's your funeral, Weeks."

Weeks shuddered. "I don't like your choice of words. Anyway, I'm safe enough with Carlotta. She doesn't want to kill me—yet!"

Butch didn't like the laugh that came from Carlotta's red gash of a mouth. If he were Weeks, he wouldn't be too sure about her!

"You staying here?" Weeks asked him.

Butch nodded, "For a few minutes."

Weeks and Carlotta left. Butch went down with them as far as the lower floor, and sat at the bar for a few minutes.

He lighted a cigar and sipped another glass of celery tonic.

The bartender sniffed. "I don't like to be fresh, mister, but that's an awful smellin' rope you're smokin'. What is it, anyway?"

BUTCH exhaled a huge cloud of blue smoke.

"Camphor," he stated. "I soak 'em in camphor for a few days before I smoke 'em. Makes 'em cool and nice."

"It may make 'em cool," corrected the bartender, "but it certainly don't make 'em nice!"

Butch moved haughtily away from the bar and sat at a small table near the door marked private. The supper room was dim, and few people remained at the tables. The orchestra had put away their instruments and departed for the night. But

Butch intended to remain until he could get into that private office without being too obtrusive about it, and have a look a round. He particularly wanted to have a look at the private telephone over which Carlotta had spoken.

A waiter handed the check to a beefy man who seemed to be host to a large table of people at the far end of the room. The beefy man questioned the check. There was a quiet argument, and then a noisier one. Finally the beefy man rose unsteadily from his seat and threw a wild swing at the waiter. Other waiters closed in efficiently, as they always seem to do in nightclub emergencies. The beefy man and his party were eased from the place. The show provided a brief but interesting spectacle, and all present watched it to its conclusion.

When the excitement was over, and the customers returned to their drinks, Butch was no longer seated at the small table near the private door. He had passed quickly and quietly through that door into the office of Mr. Legs Landers.

CHAPTER XX
Visit from a Corpse

MORBID tension held the Black Bat as he drove through the silent city streets with a dead man as his only company. Luckily, the man was small, and his body fitted neatly into the confined space of the luggage compartment.

It was the Black Bat's intention to leave his grisly companion in the apartment of Kenneth Weeks. The idea held its element of grim humor, for Butch had told him that Weeks was in a generally jittery condition. But it was not the humor of the situation which activated him.

He reasoned that Weeks would be thrown into a very paroxysm of panic when he came home to his flat to find a dead man already occupying it. Weeks would have to find some way of disposing of the body, and it wouldn't be easy for a man not versed in the methods of the underworld. For, in spite of his present criminal activities, Weeks was not a professional gangster. He would have to call in help from his partners, and the Black Bat was desirous of making personal contact with some of that crew.

The apartment building in which Weeks lived was neither pretentious nor squalid. It was simply average. There was a front door, and another door which led to the basement. The Black Bat chose the latter.

He parked the coupé directly opposite the door and stepped to the sidewalk. He glanced upward, scanning the rows of windows. There was not a light in the building.

Swiftly, he unlocked the luggage compartment and drew forth the body. He held the small form close to his own and, in one stride, was across the walk and into the cellarway.

Four dumbwaiters, he saw, serviced the various apartments. The third of these listed, among others—K. Weeks, Apt. 305.

That would be on the third floor. The Black Bat put his head in the shaft and looked upward. He drew easily at the rope, and the dumbwaiter slid silently to the bottom of the dark shaft.

A half dozen milk bottles came out of the box, and were replaced by a dead man.

The Black Bat squeezed through the narrow aperture and leaned his weight upon the proper rope. The counterbalance had not been designed to offset such a weight, so the pulling was hard, but, one hand over the other, he managed to draw the box upward until he faced the small door that must let upon the kitchen of Week's apartment.

Retaining a grip upon the rope with one hand, the Black Bat produced a thin, flat sliver of steel, pliable and exceedingly strong. It was almost too easy. The door was held only by a pressure-clasp, and it yielded easily to the steel sliver.

Lifting his deceased companion from the dumbwaiter, the Black Bat found a small fireplace in the living room. Drawn up to face it was a deep divan, a cozy spot for cozy moments. It was in this divan that the Black Bat deposited the small man's body.

AND now, from beyond that door, he heard the soft sounds of feet. Quickly, he retreated to his sanctuary in the dumbwaiter. Perched there, and with the door slightly opened, he commanded a view of the living room.

The entry door opened and Weeks and Carlotta entered the apartment.

"Fine thing!" Weeks was saying. "They close all the bars and make a man go home to get a drink!" Then he paused and folded his arms about the dark-haired girl. "But home isn't such a bad place sometimes, after all!"

For a moment, Carlotta contributed to the embrace, then she pushed Weeks gently away from her, laughing softly at him.

"We were to have a drink, my Kenny," she reminded him.

"Okay. Park yourself while I rustle up the mixings."

Weeks crossed to a folding bar in the far corner of the room. Carlotta strolled toward the fireplace, her hips swinging. The room was dim, lighted by only a single lamp. She slipped before the divan, preparatory to sitting in it—and then she froze, her eyes widening.

The sound she uttered was not, strictly speaking,

a scream. It was not loud, nor was it piercing. But it held the ultimate note of horror.

Weeks swung. "What is it?"

Carlotta was leaning against the mantel, and her long forefinger pointed fixedly at the grisly sight before her. Her eyes stared, and the dead eyes of the small man stared unblinkingly back at her.

In a moment, Weeks was beside Carlotta, and he, too, stared down at the grim sight.

"My God!" he whispered. "It's Ware—and he's dead as hell!"

The Black Bat could see Weeks beginning to tremble. Then the city engineer's face hardened.

"What kind of a joke is this!" he gritted. "And what the hell am I going to do with it?"

He bent, looked more closely at the dead man. In the center of the corpse's forehead was a small black sticker in the form of a bat with wings outspread.

Weeks staggered backwards as though he had been struck.

"The Black Bat!" he muttered, and his voice was edged sharply with terror.

Then, by some superhuman effort, he pulled himself together. He reached for the telephone and dialed furiously.

"What are you going to do?" demanded Carlotta. "Call the police?"

"Police, hell!" grunted Weeks. "I'm calling Legs Landers. He ought to know how to get rid of a stiff!"

In the dumbwaiter the Black Bat settled down for a wait.

When Butch first entered Landers' office, he went directly to the desk. There was only one telephone visible, therefore the one over which Carlotta had spoken must be hidden in the desk. He found it in the lower right hand drawer. Characteristically, he lifted the instrument from its cradle, and listened.

Presently a voice drifted across the wire—a voice incredibly cold and hard that even the imperturbable Butch was shivered by the single word, "Hello...."

Butch hung up quietly. He had nothing to say to the owner of that voice—at least at present. But he remembered the voice, and someday he hoped to meet its possessor in person. For Butch knew intuitively that that man would be the one responsible for the present activities of the Black Bat and his little band of crimebusters!

He looked systematically through the office. At length, the opening of the other door warned him of someone's approach. Butch looked swiftly for a haven. A closet offered itself, and Butch accepted the offer.

HE was scarcely within it, and the door closed after him, then somebody entered. Butch could hear his steps crossing the room, and the creaking of the swivel chair as he sat down at the desk. Then came the sound of the desk drawer opening, and presently, a one-sided conversation.

"I don't know what you mean," Landers was saying. "I just got in. This is the first time I've called you this evening." There was a pause, then, "Yeah, must have been a crossed wire. Anyway, Boss, I did what you wanted me to do. I watched to see if that Professor Kelton was strictly on the level. He isn't.

"When Dunbar left Kelton's apartment, Kelton followed him. It won't do him any good, and it makes the plans for tomorrow night that much better! Kelton's either a cop or an aide of the Black Bat's. But whichever he is, it won't do him much good when he's burned to a cinder!"

In the closet, Butch's big frame tightened. So they were going to murder Silk, were they? Maybe Silk and Butch had their little arguments, their little differences of opinion, but nobody was going to harm Silk Kirby, not while Butch O'Brien was still able to crack one gangster's head against that of another!

But he remained quietly in his closet, and Landers hung up the phone. Almost immediately, however, the ordinary phone upon the desk rang sharply. Landers answered, listened briefly.

"All right, don't tell everything you know over a telephone, you fool!" Another pause. "All right, Weeks, I'll be over. Where's that big lug of a bodyguard of yours, anyway? Here, you say? No, he must have left before I got back. Yeah, I'll be over!"

Legs Landers left his office hurriedly. Butch came out of the closet, chuckling quietly. He had an idea concerning the reason for Weeks' call to Landers. The Black Bat must have planted his dead man on Weeks, and Weeks needed help in getting rid of his unwelcome guest!

Butch slipped into the supper room. There was a man sitting at the small table which Butch had vacated a few minutes before. Butch had never seen the man before, but the stranger was motioning to him to sit down. Butch complied.

"You really should be careful about snooping around other people's private offices," said Leonard Curland.

Butch bristled. "Look, I don't know who you are, but—"

His huge fists bunched up, and he glowered at Curland.

"Take it easy," Curland said hastily. "I understand you're acting as bodyguard for Kenneth Weeks."

"What about it?" Butch asked.

"Just this—I know you're not a bodyguard by trade. But I think I do know your real occupation."

For fully thirty seconds, the two men looked into each other's eyes.

"All right," Butch said, "talk. I'll listen."

"Weeks has something that you'd like to get," Curland said, "that a number of people would like to get. But you won't get it from Weeks. He's a strange mixture of weakling and patriot. But I believe I can put you in touch with a party who is also able—and more willing—to sell the information you want."

Butch was acting the part of a sinister international plotter with an aplomb which would have been the envy of more bona fide members of the profession. His eyes narrowed to mere slits, and he studied Curland.

"How do I know you're reliable?" he asked.

Curland shrugged. "In your—er—work, can you ever know?"

Butch leaned closer. "What's the price?"

Curland rose. "If you're interested, and care to come with me—"

BUTCH also rose. Together he and Curland left the Sky Club. At the curb was a sedan, and at its wheel was a hard-eyed man who reached behind him to open the car's back door. At Curland's invitation, Butch stepped in. Curland followed. The car rolled down the street.

For perhaps a half hour, the car rolled smoothly on its way. Curland and Butch spoke politely but inconsequentially of such matters as the weather.

At length, with the city behind them and only an occasional house facing their route, Curland produced a large handkerchief.

"You understand the necessity for this, of course," Curland said apologetically.

"Of course," agreed Butch.

He submitted to the blindfold.

"I should have your gun, too," Curland pointed out.

Butch laid a restraining paw upon the other's reaching arm.

"Wait a minute. The blindfold's okay, but I'd just as soon keep the gun, if you don't mind. I don't know you, nor where you're taking me. I'm showing my good faith by going with you at all, so you ought to be willing to show good faith on your side by letting me keep my gun."

The driver of the car spoke for the first time.

"The guy's right, Curland. We're friends, not enemies. Let him keep his rod!"

Curland subsided and Butch breathed a silent sigh of relief.

The car turned and slowed, and Butch could hear the crunching of gravel beneath the wheels. Then the sedan stopped, and Butch was being helped to the ground.

From the barred window of her upstairs room, Carol could get a partial view of the arrival. Her eyes strained through the darkness. There was something definitely familiar about the width and gait of one of the dusky figures below. It seems to Carol that that figure had a cloth of some kind over its eyes, which would seem to denote that its wearer was not an habitue of the House.

Yes, she was almost sure that the new arrival was Butch O'Brien and, even if he had come here as a prisoner like herself, the very presence of the huge ham-fisted man gave the girl a feeling of imminent security which she had not felt in many long, hopeless hours.

Yet her most persistent anxiety revolved about the question of the whereabouts of the Black Bat. And Silk Kirby, Professor Kelton, where was he?

Had Carol been able to see Professor Kelton at that moment, she would have laughed in spite of her many misgivings. The Professor had followed Paul Dunbar to a highly respectable hotel, where Dunbar had gone to his room and, presumably, to bed. The Professor had returned to his lonely apartment on the Drive, where he had had no luck in reaching Tony Quinn on the private number. He had then sat down to his interminable solitaire. And his language, muttered at the four walls and the fifty-two cards, was most unprofessional.

CHAPTER XXI
Treason Among Thieves

NOT directly, but Legs Landers did go to the apartment of Kenneth Weeks. But first he detoured to a questionable boarding house known affectionately to gangdom as "Mother Martin's Place." Here he interrupted a poker game, taking away with him two capable looking thugs who answered respectively to the cognomens of Push-face and Wheezy.

En route to Weeks' place, Landers explained the reason for their trip, and the time was thus taken up with a discussion as to the best method of disposing of the body of the late Mr. Ware.

"I don't care a damn what you do with it," Weeks said when they arrived, "but get it out of here!"

"Sure," said Push-face. "Me an' Wheezy'll take care of it."

The two thugs left, bearing their macabre masquerader. Weeks sank into a chair.

From his point of vantage in the dumbwaiter, the Black Bat had witnessed the little drama. The Bat prepared to make himself known to his adversaries. He loosened the .38 in its holster.

Then Carlotta herself solved the question of her presence.

"I am going home," she announced. "I am sorry, but I cannot stay longer in this room. I will get a taxi at the corner."

A moment more and she was gone. "I'm sick of it, Landers!" Weeks said. "Everything's going wrong. The Black Bat is in on this thing, and you know what that means. Look what's happened so far: Hall is dead, and Berren and Conal and Peters died in that warehouse blaze, and tonight—Ware. The Bat got all of 'em, Landers. Maybe I'm next!"

Landers was grinning at Weeks, but there wasn't much mirth in his smile.

"Maybe so," he agreed. "It sure looks like he's got you tied up with this thing. Me, now, I'm lucky. He doesn't know about me!"

The Black Bat smiled grimly. "That," he thought, "is what *you* think!"

"Look, Landers," Weeks said. "I'm on the spot. Did it ever occur to you that I'm the guy that's responsible for the whole set-up? If it wasn't for me, there wouldn't have been any racket!"

"If it wasn't for you, there wouldn't have *needed* to be any racket!"

Weeks waved his hand disparingly. "That's beside the point. There *is* a racket, and it's a damned good one—a damned sight better from a financial point of view than the legitimate racket we started out to work. But what I'm getting at is—what is there in it for me after the Boss gets through? For that matter, what is there in it for *you?*"

"Not much," Landers admitted.

Weeks glared suspiciously at his companion. "Unless you're the big Boss yourself! I'm still not sure you're not!"

Landers shrugged.

"If you're not," Weeks pursued, "it puts you in the same class with me. D'you know why the big Boss won't let us know who he is? Because he wants a couple of patsies to hang the whole thing on if anything goes wrong! We wouldn't even be in a position to turn state's evidence and try to make a deal for ourselves!"

Landers was thoughtful. For a long time he said nothing.

"I told you I didn't know who the Boss is, Weeks," he said slowly. "But I've got a sort of idea who he is. There's a lot of sense in what you've been saying. As I see it, the only solution is for you and me to stand strictly together. Sometimes that safety deposit box gets very full of cash—very full indeed. If I can ever make sure about the guy I think is the big Boss, there'll be enough to make you and me both rich—if anything should happen to the Boss."

Weeks stuck out his hand.

"Too bad the Boss won't be alive to spend it."

LANDERS took the proffered hand, and they shook.

A voice, low and level and commanding, said:

"Hold that pose."

The two men turned slowly, stared at the black apparition which confronted them, a blue-black and businesslike automatic in each unwavering hand.

"The Black Bat!" Landers muttered at last.

The Black Bat bowed. "I've been considerably interested by your conversation."

Weeks found his voice.

"What do you want of us?"

The Black Bat's shoulders shrugged. The twin automatics waved significantly.

"Of course, I should kill you."

Legs Landers was staring hard at him. "Who are you, anyway?"

"Who am I?" the Black Bat repeated. "Suppose I were to tell you that I'm—the Boss!"

Landers' eyes glittered, and the Black Bat saw that he could not be taken in thus. But Weeks, who had no inkling of the Boss' real identity and had only once heard the cold, cruel voice of that mysterious personage, took the Black Bat's rhetorical remark for gospel.

With a smothered cry of mingled fear and rage, he hurled himself forward. If the black-garbed visitor were indeed the Boss, it was a case of kill or be killed!

The merest pressure of the Black Bat's finger would have blasted Weeks to eternity. But he did not yet want to eliminate Landers and Weeks from the dangerous game they were playing.

Landers thought he knew the identity of the Boss, and that was a piece of knowledge which the Black Bat coveted. Too, a criminal organization torn by internecine strife was already half beaten.

The Black Bat's right arm moved with the swiftness and accuracy of a bolt of man-made lightning. The hard steel of the gun barrel cracked against Weeks' jaw, and the man crumpled.

But Landers had taken advantage of the split-second in which Weeks' body was between himself and the Black Bat. Landers skirted around like a ball-carrying halfback on an end run, and flung himself upon the Black Bat's back with the force of a panther.

Landers was not a small man, nor was he soft. And he had grown up in the catch-as-catch-can tradition of street brawling toughs. The Black Bat sensed that in Landers he had met an adversary worthy of his note.

Landers' hard right arm went beneath his chin in a devastating stranglehold, and the room spun before the Black Bat's eyes. Again he might have disposed of his adversary by the simple expedient

of reversing one of his guns and blowing Landers' head from his shoulders, and yet again he held from that course. Landers seemed to have divined this unwillingness on the part of the Black Bat to indulge in gunplay, and was staking his life on it.

The very fact that he held a gun in each hand hampered the effectiveness of the Bat's fists, which he needed badly to tear that choking arm from his windpipe.

He tossed the gun from his left hand. It plumped into an overstuffed chair. His freed fingers gripped at Landers' right wrist, digging into the artery there, but the encircling arm did not relax its hold.

Landers' eyes were glued hungrily upon the gun lying so temptingly in the chair across the room. Foolishly he had come unarmed, but if he could reach that weapon—

Slowly, every muscle tense and aching, he forced the Black Bat in that direction, only, in the next moment, to be forced backwards himself, Yet be gained ground.

SUDDENLY, the Black Bat insinuated his right foot between Landers' legs, and hooked his toes around the other's right ankle. His left hand reached over and back, and his fingers gripped the corded back of Landers' neck. Then, with every remaining ounce of his strength, he crouched low, kicked out with his right foot, and at the same time tugged mightily at his adversary's head.

Landers rolled up and over the Black Bat's head like a pinwheel. Almost simultaneously, the butt of the .38 cracked hollowly upon Landers' skull, and the Black Bat eased the unconscious man to the floor.

The Black Bat knelt, and swiftly ran through the pocket of Weeks and Landers. He found only one thing which interested him, and that was a small key in Landers' vest pocket. One side of this key was inscribed with the numbers 5-8-4, and the reverse side bore the legend "Savall Safety Deposit Company."

He returned the key to its resting place in Landers' pocket.

From the bedroom, he procured a set of sheets, which he tore into narrow strips. First he gagged both men, then proceeded to truss them. He was careful to tie the knots so they would appear businesslike, yet be capable of solution after a certain amount of industrious effort on the parts of the victims. Let Landers and Weeks escape. Let them believe that the Black Bat was not the formidable antagonist they had thought him. Let them even have a feeling of contempt for him. Then, in the ultimate moment of cracking down, the Black Bat would disillusion them.

He left the apartment as he had entered it, via the dumbwaiter. A moment later he was in the black coupé , driving toward the building which housed the vaults of the Savall Safety Deposit Company.

Even the Black Bat had no idea nor intention of attempting to invade the vaults of the company. Case-hardened steel defenses and inviolable time-locks made such a task insurmountable, and the Black Bat was not presently interested in the contents of box 584 anyway. What he was interested in was simply the record books of the Savall Company. Box 584, he knew, would be listed under two names. One of those names would be Landers—but it was the other name, and address, which he was particularly anxious to uncover.

The offices he planned to visit were on the ground floor of a large office building, and had their vault deep in the foundations of the structure. Overalled janitors and charwomen moved through the building on their nightly rounds. One man industriously polished the brass entrance doors. He turned, hearing a tentative "Pardon me," and saw a black-garbed man who wore a wide-brimmed black hat far down over his eyes.

"I'm looking for a neighbor of mine," said the black-garbed man. "His wife has been taken sick, and he's needed at home."

"What's his name?"

"Nelson.'

The name came easily to the mouth of the man in black.

The janitor shook his head. "Don't know him. But there's quite a few of 'em works here. If his wife is sick, I guess it'd be all right for you to go in an' look for him." He produced a key and unlocked the heavy alarm-lock.

"Thanks," said the Black Bat. "Thanks very much."

He passed through the door and into the gloom of the lobby. Leading off the lobby was a door to the offices of the Savall Safety Deposit Company, and the door was open!

The Black Bat slipped through the door and proceeded unerringly through the darkness to a row of cabinets at the rear of the floor. There he paused to look once again at the janitor. The man still plied his mop.

FROM his belt, the Black Bat drew the call ring of keys. The first cabinet which he opened contained a variety of ledgers, but nothing the Bat saw at a glance which would interest him. The second cabinet was equally as unproductive. But in the third he found that which he sought, a ledger with the single gilt-embossed word "Clients" on its binding. He drew it forth and turned the pages carefully. Each box-number was listed, and presently the Black Bat's finger stopped at number 584.

Two names were entered under that number,

indicating that the box was held jointly. The first name was Arthur Brown, and the address was one on Fifth Avenue. The name, the Black Bat realized, was fictitious, but the address was that of the Sky Club. The other name, listed as William Manley, was doubtless also fictitious, but the address that followed it was one on Seaview Boulevard!

The Black Bat whistled silently, and exultation surged over him. Seaview Boulevard! Dunbar and Curland had spoken of the House being near the ocean when they had left the Acme offices with Carol as their prisoner. And Seaview Boulevard ran directly beside the wide sweep of the Atlantic for many miles! At last the Black Bat knew the location of the House—and it was there that Carol was held captive!

He replaced the ledger and closed the cabinet door quietly. Then he turned and slipped out the way he had come.

A moment later the Black Bat was behind the wheel of the coupé and it was gathering speed, headed east toward the ocean and Seaview Boulevard!

CHAPTER XXII
Prelude to Hell

JUST as soon as they entered the House, Curland removed the blindfold from Butch's eyes. Butch found himself in a spacious, comfortably furnished drawing room. Also in the room were Curland and the driver of the car, and still another ugly looking man whom Butch had not seen before. The latter stood near the room's one entrance.

"The person who wishes to see you," Curland said, "will be down presently."

Curland ordered the two thugs from the room. They left sullenly.

"I can make all the arrangements short of the actual price-setting," Curland said. "We have a copy of the formula which is in the vaults of the United States War Department. We're willing to sell that copy—if the price is right."

Butch fidgeted in his chair. All this silly talk, and what he really wanted to know was whether Carol was in this house?

He said, sparring, "How do I know you won't sell the same formula to others?"

Curland smiled. "You don't. You'll have to take our word on that. And even if we sold the formula to every other—to every other interested party in the world—could your employers still afford to be without it?"

"Have you sold the formula to any other—*person*—yet?" queried Butch.

For a moment Curland studied him. "I'll be frank. No, we haven't."

Butch sighed with silent relief. Thus far the world was safe from the newest war-scourge. "I would suggest," he said, "that you refrain from doing so. I believe I can offer a price large enough to make it worth your while to withhold the formula from any other bidders."

Butch was rather proud of that speech.

Upstairs, Carol had been debating the advisability of making her presence known to Butch, if the man who had been brought to the house were indeed Butch.

But before she could make any plans, a key turned in the lock, and the door of her prison swung open. A burly, evil-faced fellow stepped through and stood menacingly before her. Behind him, two others entered the room very quickly.

One was an attractive dark-haired girl with swaying hips and deep black eyes that harbored cruelty. The other was a large, florid man, who had the appearance of a man used to giving orders—and having them obeyed. Now, however, he spoke not at all. It was the dark-haired girl, Carlotta, who did the talking.

She stared now at Carol with the antagonism of one beautiful woman for another.

"Have you had time yet to decide whether or not you will tell us why you were spying upon us; who, for example, is the Black Bat?"

Carol did not answer. Carlotta turned her head, nodded slightly to the two thugs. They left the room, but returned almost immediately with a common armchair of the dining room variety, together with a squarish metal box and a coil of wire. They placed the chair against one wall of the room, and the two men became busy over the wire and the metal box.

Carol watched the proceedings with mingled interest and apprehension.

"You are interested, no?" said Carlotta. "Perhaps we should explain to you what we have here. This"—she touched the metal box with the toe of her slipper— "is a contrivance which steps up the electricity from the house current. This electric chair of ours will not kill, or, at least, it will not kill at once. But perhaps, after the current has been running through your body for a few minutes, you will talk."

AT a signal from the florid man, each of the thugs took one of Carol's arms and literally lifted her into the chair. She did not struggle, for she knew it would be useless, and she knew that she would have need of her strength. Straps fixed her wrists and ankles to the arms and legs of the chair.

At last the others stood back.

"You have still time in which to change your mind," Carlotta said. "Who is the Black Bat?"

Carol's eyes stared into the other woman's levelly, and her voice was level as her gaze.

"I don't know what you're talking about!"

At a signal from Carlotta, one of the thugs touched a rheostat on the transformer. Carol's body tensed as the first shock coursed through her body. The current danced up her spine, seeming to shower into sparks in her brain, setting her teeth chattering.

The rheostat was moved up another notch. An added surge of power washed over her. Every nerve fibre in her body was fraying. The faces before her swam in her vision. The current was just sufficient to hold her suspended in an abyss of horror which stretched below and beyond her to a terrible infinity.

She knew what would happen. Sooner or later she would crack, her mind flogged into acquiescence. She would answer anything, any question, to be freed of the awful nerve torture which assailed her.

If only she could scream, she thought dully. If she could open her mouth and let forth all the pent-up noise within her. It might give her new strength. Her head went back, and her mouth opened wide.

The shattering cry which issued from Carol's agonized throat was not a simple scream. It was a name—a name which rose, unbidden, from the depths of her subconscious.

"Butch!"

Downstairs, the owner of that name stiffened in his chair. The cry which reached his ears could have come from but one person, Carol Hastings!

Deep rage shook Butch's frame, His face was livid. His shoulder and neck muscles strained, against his clothes.

His lips curled back from his teeth in an animal snarl. He started to rise from his chair.

"Stay where you are!" Curland was saying.

"That's me she's callin', see? Outa my way, rat!"

Curland was on his feet, his eyes widening, his right hand darting toward his left armpit. But Butch O'Brien bore down upon him like a juggernaut. The powerful right arm drew back, then lashed out with the devastating power of a steam turbine.

All the world's hatred of evil was in that punch. The ham-like fist crashed full into Curland's face. There was the sound of crunching bone, of teeth snapping at their roots. Curland toppled heavily backwards to the floor, his jaw splintered, his mouth poring blood.

In a stride, Butch was across the room to the door and out into the hallway, headed for the stairs, his hand groping for his gun. As he started upward, a man showed himself at the head of the stairs. In his hand a .45 coughed death. The heavy slugs tore past Butch.

Then his own heavy automatic was belching flame and lead. The man at the top of the stairs spun in a half circle and plunged downwards, his body crashing on the stairs. Butch pounded on up the steps.

Another gunman loomed before him. This time Butch's .45 expended only a single bullet. It caught the man in the mathematical center of his forehead.

BUTCH was in the upper hall. To his right a door slammed, and he heard a key turn in the lock.

"Butch!"

Again the cry assailed him. With a bellow of rage he threw himself against the closed door. There was a crash from within, and something ripped through the door a scant inch from his head. Tiny splinters dug into his face and neck. Again he hurled his weight against the door. The two hundred and twenty pound battering ram tore the door from its hinges.

For one fleeting instant Butch saw Carol slumped in the chair, and then something hard and heavy thudded against his skull as he went through the doorway. He toppled heavily to the floor, joining Carol in the infinite reaches of oblivion.

Carlotta dropped the monkey wrench. She turned to the florid man.

"So, Jeemy, even Mr. Butch O'Brien is a part of the Black Bat's organization!"

Carlotta left the room. In less than a minute, she was back. She came close to the florid man.

"Dirks and Arnold are dead, Jeemy," she said, "and Curland is unconscious downstairs." For a moment she was thoughtful. "The Black Bat has killed seven of us so far, Jeemy. Who will be next? You? Me?"

The man took Carlotta into his arms and held her close.

"There won't be any more of it, Carlotta. After tomorrow, there'll be just you and I, Carlotta. Every one that has died has meant one less to share in our profits. And there'll be two hundred thousand in cash from that phony Professor, all for us!"

"But if you know the Professor is a phony, why do you think he will have two hundred thousand dollars in cash?"

"Because he isn't aware of the fact that we know he's a phony! He supplied Dunbar with bank references and they're one hundred percent. Whatever his game is he's got the dough to back up his masquerade, and apparently he's perfectly willing to spend it if he thinks he's getting anywhere on this case!

"Unfortunately for him, he's not going to get anywhere but dead! He'll roast in one of those buildings he's buying, and we'll plant plenty of evidence to indicate that he was behind the whole business and got caught in a boomerang blaze of his own setting! Not bad, eh?

"And speaking of being dead, it wouldn't be a bad idea if Weeks and Landers and Dunbar were to die, too!"

Carlotta smiled. "And then there would be just us?"

"Yes, just us. A ship to South America and a life of luxury. And the bomb formula can be marketed just as readily in South America as here!"

"Where is the formula now?"

"In three places, Carlotta. One copy is in the vaults of the United States War Department, another is in my safety deposit box and the third is in the mind of Kenneth Weeks! That's a good reason in itself for the elimination of Weeks!"

"Just one more day!" Carlotta said dreamily. Then she faced the more practical aspects of the present. "But what are we to do now?"

"Burn this place. With our gang almost annihilated, we couldn't cope with the Black Bat now, even if we did get his identity from this girl. No, the best thing to do is follow our plan and clear out. There's enough of the stuff in the cellar to do the job and leave enough for tomorrow's work, too."

Carlotta motioned toward the unconscious forms of Butch and Carol.

"What about them?" she questioned the florid man.

"Remove all identification from their bodies, and leave them here, of course. Yes, and Curland, too. He's out, and he's no good to us anyway with a busted head. Push-face and Wheezy will catch up with us at the other place. These two, with Weeks and Landers and Dunbar, will be enough to take care of tomorrow's work.

"Push-face and Wheezy are just ordinary hoods. We can pay them off in peanuts without denting our bankroll. Weeks and Landers and Dunbar we won't need to pay off at all."

THE first streaks of approaching dawn serrated the blackness of the sky. And, as the light grew, Carlotta and the florid man were extremely busy. The man carried foot-square zinc boxes from the cellar to a sedan whose rear floorboards lifted to reveal a commodious secret receptacle for them.

Carlotta, meanwhile, traced intricate patterns of a coarse, reddish powder through the place. Both finished their work at precisely the sane time.

Once more, they visited the three unconscious figures. None showed signs of any early recovery. Carlotta and the florid man then repaired to the attic.

In the center of the floor was a small pile of the same powdery substance which trailed its serpentine way throughout the House. A length of grayish metallic ribbon extended from the pile.

The man struck a match, applied it to the free end of the metal ribbon. There was a dull red glow.

"Five minutes," he said simply. He and Carlotta walked leisurely down the stairs, through the front door, and into the sedan. Slightly less than one minute from the time of the ignition of the metal fuse, the sedan was two blocks away.

One hundred and eighty seconds later, a small black coupé stopped before the House. A figure in solid black stepped from it, and advanced toward the door. In his hands were twin .38 automatics. Apparently, the man in black was here for a purpose, and was in a hurry to accomplish it, whatever the dangers presented by a frontal attack.

The door opened to this touch. Cautiously the Black Bat entered, guns ready. None barred his way. Beneath the black mask, his brows furrowed. Had he found the House only to have its occupants, foe and friend alike, gone?

The living room showed him the unconscious form of Curland, battered and bloody.

That mashed face seemed to bear a trademark with which the Black Bat was familiar—the imprint of the fist of Butch O'Brien!

The Bat turned, made for the hall and the stairs. And as his foot touched the first step, he heard, far above him, a muffled *pooof!*

He had heard that same sound before, and he knew it was the first note in a seething symphony of searing flame—a prelude to hell!

CHAPTER XXIII
The Wings of Flame

VICIOUSLY, the heat reached down at him from above like the fetid breath of some horrid monster, choking him, hammering at his eyeballs. But the Black Bat took the stairs three at a time.

The ceiling of the upper floor was already starting to drip fire—that devastating liquid fire that melted everything with which it came in contact. Smoke swirled down from the attic in blinding eddies.

To the right, the Black Bat saw a battered door, and on the floor of the fume-filled room beyond, a huge, huddled figure. Butch! The Black Bat was through the door in a leap.

Then another figure—the figure of a girl, strapped into a grotesque parody of an electric-chair. Carol! A silent prayer of thanksgiving flooded the heart of the Black Bat, for he could see that the girl lived.

Carol's head moved lazily on her shoulders, and her eyes were trying to open. The Black Bat was tearing the straps from her arms and legs, and his voice was calling her back from the dim depths of darkness:

"Carol! Carol! It's Tony!"

A shudder passed over her slim young body, and her eyes looked upon him.

"Tony! Thank God!"

"Quick! We haven't an instant to lose!" He was helping the girl to her feet.

"I'm all right," she said. "Get Butch!"

The Black Bat bent, threw the weight of the huge man over his shoulder like a bag of feathers.

"Don't wait for me!" he told Carol. "Get out of the house!"

But she would not leave him. Together they worked their way toward the stairs. Little pools of fire burned evilly on the floor, and they picked their way carefully. Drops of searing flame lobbed from the ceiling. And now new traceries of fire appeared, dancing about them like mad demons of hate.

Down the stairs they went, feeling through the denseness of the smoke. The force of the heat pushed at their backs. The hungry, angry flames raced after them, greedy tongues licking out at the escaping meal.

In the lower hall, the Black Bat paused. From the living room came a piercing scream—a scream of mingled pain and horror. A man with a bloody face crawled toward him across the floor. And then the man stopped, and a new horror froze his face.

"The Black Bat!" he hissed through mashed and broken lips.

Curland! And as much as the Black Bat hated him for all he represented, he could not bring himself to leave him in the holocaust.

The Black Bat turned away and ran for the front door. A moment later he was outside, loading the huge form of Butch into the coupé . Then he turned, started again for the blazing building.

"Tony, don't! You can't go back in there!"

"I've got to, Carol!"

He was racing toward the doorway that poured a solid stream of smoke into the open. As he neared it, there was a deep-throated roar and the house burst into a solid mass of all-consuming flame.

The Black Bat staggered backwards. And from the inferno came one long agonized scream of pure horror—a scream that terminated suddenly on a high, piercing note, almost as though the sound had been cut with a knife.

The Black Bat climbed into the coupé , and threw it into gear. Beside him was Carol, and beyond her, Butch. The big man was stirring painfully. Driving with one hand, the Black Bat removed the mask that covered his face. The wide brim of the black hat served almost as well.

THIRTY minutes later the three were in the living room of the home of Tony Quinn. Butch was shaking the grogginess from his head like a huge setter divesting itself of water.

The doorbell rang. Tony Quinn tapped his way to the door with his rubber-ferruled cane. A sleepy messenger boy held out an envelope.

"Why," he asked plaintively, "couldn't you have answered the bell sooner? I been here all night with this message!"

The boy left, examining a ten dollar bill with patent disbelief.

Quinn was back in the living room, tearing open the envelope. Butch and Carol watched as he drew forth the one scribbled sheet. It contained, simply, five addresses, but Quinn knew its significance as well as if Silk had enclosed a long letter of explanation.

"They've made a deal with Professor Kelton," Quinn told the others. "They're scared, and they're unloading."

"And I'll tell you something else they're doing," Butch volunteered. "They're plannin' on burning the Prof in one of the buildings after they get the dough from him!"

Carol gasped. "Then they know Silk is working against them?"

Butch nodded. "I heard Landers talkin' it over with the Boss. I heard that guy's voice myself, and I was lookin' forward to meetin' him!"

His huge fists clenched into tight balls.

"I saw him," said Carol. "And I've seen the man's pictures in the paper, too, but I can't place him."

Tony Quinn was across the room, bent over a desk upon which was spread a map of the city.

"I can go you both one better," he said. "I know who the Boss is, and I know his name. And if I knew where he was at this moment, I'd feel a lot better!"

"You know who he is? Who?"

Quinn shook his head. "Not yet. Tonight will end the whole affair, I'm sure. Then I'll tell you who he is—or, I hope, who he was—and I'll also tell you a story about a map!"

The face of a desk clock upon the table glowed dimly red, signaling that someone was calling on the private phone in the room behind the fireplace.

"That'll be Silk," said Quinn. "But we can't answer it!"

"Can't answer it?"

Quinn shook his head grimly. "If they suspect Silk, they've probably managed to tap his phone wires. And we can't afford to have any of that crew listening in on us. No, I'm afraid Silk'll have to walk into danger without knowing what faces him! It's simply up to us to be on hand at the right place at the right time!"

IT was late evening before Dunbar arrived at the apartment of Professor Kelton. He was all apologies.

"Sorry I couldn't make it sooner, Professor. Been busy as the proverbial bee all day."

"That's more than I've been," Silk thought. "It's all right, Mr. Dunbar," Silk said, "though I must admit I've been a little nervous with all this cash on my hands all day." He nodded toward a small black bag on a chair. "Two hundred thousand dollars in cash. If the buildings live up to your prospectus, I see no reason why we shouldn't be able to consummate our deal at once."

Dunbar's eyes glowed. "And there's no reason why we shouldn't look at the buildings tonight," he added.

"Do you have a gun?" the Professor asked. "I hate to leave the money here in the apartment, and I dislike carrying it at night, unarmed."

Silk's last remark was not entirely true, for beneath his left arm nestled a very businesslike .38.

"It so happens that I do have a gun," Dunbar said. "I've been carrying rather large sums lately myself, in the course of liquidating our business, you know."

Silk held out the black bag.

"Would you mind?"

"Not at all." Dunbar's hand closed around the handle of the bag. "And now, shall we go?"

"Of course."

The two men left the apartment.

SILK hoped fervently that the Black Bat would put in an appearance this night. All day he had tried to reach Tony Quinn on the private telephone, and without success. It wasn't particularly reassuring. Perhaps the Black Bat had been disposed of. Perhaps Carol and the huge Butch also had been snatched from the fight.

If such were the case, Silk Kirby was now alone in the struggle. The odds against him, he knew, were long. Once it became necessary for him to show his hand, he could expect no mercy. But if defeat and death were stacked in the cards for him, Silk was determined to play his losing hand to the last chip.

Before the building a car waited. At the wheel was Legs Landers. Silk and Dunbar climbed into the back seat. The car completed the loop around the Drive, and headed east on the next street. As it turned into the next avenue, two other cars started from the curb a block away.

One of these cars was a black coupé, and in it was a man wearing somber black clothes and a wide brimmed black hat that shadowed grim scars about his eyes. In the other car were a large man and a small girl.

At 83rd Street, Dunbar's car turned east again. Landers had been giving considerable attention to his rear vision mirror. It seemed to him that two particular cars were trailing him. But now he sighed with relief. Instead of turning the corner after him, the two cars had continued straight on.

What he did not know was that the black car pulled to the curb as soon as it had passed the corner. The other car drew beside it for a moment.

"Only one of the houses on Silk's list is on 83rd Street," the Black Bat said softly through the window. "We'll give them a chance to get into the place before we catch up. If, by any chance, they're really headed for one of the other places, we can catch 'em anyway. We know that car, and we know the other addresses."

Presently, the two cars moved again, very slowly now. They turned down 81st Street to Eighth Avenue, then doubled north again to 83rd. A dozen doors from 783 West 83rd Street they stopped again, but this time both cars pulled to the curb. Dunbar's car was parked a hundred feet in front of them, and it was empty. Bumper to bumper with Dunbar's car was another, roomier sedan.

The black-garbed man was on the sidewalk. Butch got out of his car. Carol started to follow him.

"You're staying in the car, Carol!" the Black Bat reminded her. "We settled that some time ago!"

There was authority in his voice, and Carol heeded. She got back into the car.

"Be careful!" she begged.

The tenement at Number 783 was a fire trap of a place if ever one existed. And now, it was almost devoid of tenants. There were names in only three of the dilapidated mailboxes in the dingy vestibule.

The Black Bat spoke softly. "Butch, I want you to get those three families out of the building! Tell them their lives depend on it! Give them money, tell them to get new quarters. And if they won't get out quietly, throw them out!"

"Sure," said Butch. "But it's likely to be a little noisy. Ain't that likely to interfere with your progress?"

"Butch, in a few minutes this place is going to be so noisy that a boiler factory would seem quiet by comparison! Get going!"

Butch pushed through the door. For a moment the Black Bat paused, drawing a mask over his eyes and a strangely shaped cloak over his shoulders. Then he flitted through the interior hallway through thick gloom to the very rear of the building. And as he went, he noted thin streams of a coarse, reddish powder traced in intricate patterns over the floor and up the stairs. The tinderbox had been opened, and the priming was ready. It needed only the spark!

At the rear, he climbed nimbly out upon a fire escape, and ran aloft as easily as a sailor in the rigging of a ship. At each floor he paused to took in through dark windows.

On the fifth floor, he found what he sought. Through the window he looked in upon a dimly lighted room. And in the room was being enacted a grim drama!

CHAPTER XXIV
FLAMING DEATH

KNOWING well enough what he was up against, Silk Kirby, in the role of Professor Kelton, stood with his hands upraised. Facing him was a large, florid man, who held a gun.

"We're obliged for the money, Professor," the florid man was saying in a mocking voice as hard and as cold as steel. He motioned to a white-faced man who stood nearby. "All right, Weeks, tie him up!"

Legs Landers pinioned the Professor's arms, and Weeks bound him securely. A dark-haired girl stuffed a cloth into the Professor's mouth. His trussed body was lowered to the floor. And this floor, too, was traced with the reddish powder.

The florid man spoke to Dunbar.

"You've attended to everything?"

Dunbar nodded. "Everything. The deeds of this and the other buildings have been made over to Kelton, and he's paid us. A nice, clean-cut business deal. When the properties burn, what simpler deduction could anybody make than that he lost his own life setting incendiary blazes in his own buildings?"

The florid man put his gun back in his pocket. Then, in a perfect example of timing, Landers and Weeks drew their own guns.

"All right," Landers hissed. "Just stand still. Weeks and I are taking over!"

The florid man gaped.

"Put down those guns, you fools!"

Landers shook his head. "Too bad you got so short of help that you had to show yourself, Boss! Push-face and Wheezy didn't even show up, did they? Know why? Because Weeks and I paid 'em off and got rid of 'em! Now you can burn with the Professor!"

Carlotta stood silent. Weeks turned to her. "Okay, Carlotta, get that black bag and we'll get out of here!"

Carlotta turned her back upon Weeks and Landers and walked toward Dunbar and the beefy man. Her hand opened her bag surreptitiously and came forth with a short-snouted pistol.

Then, suddenly, she whirled, and the gun barked. Weeks sank to his knees. There was a look of unbelief on his face, and his head shook in negation. He was dead before his head hit the floor.

The sudden unexpected turn had taken Landers quite by surprise. His gun hung useless for a moment in his hand, and that moment was enough

Suddenly, Carlotta whirled and the gun barked.

to seal his fate. Dunbar turncoated. His hand came up with a .45. Its roar filled the room like something solid. The slug ripped into Landers' face. Landers' body thudded upon that of his ally.

"Good work, Dunbar!" the beefy man gritted. "For that you can have your life!"

Carlotta took up the black bag.

"Now!" she said.

And at that moment, the window glass crashed and a black figure stepped into the room. Two guns covered the room. His voice was crisp, authoritative.

"Stand still, all of you! Get your hands up!"

For a moment, those in the room stood transfixed. From the floor, the eyes of Professor Kelton grinned up at the Black Bat.

Carlotta walked slowly toward him. There was a strange smile on her face, and her eyes stared into his narrowly.

"Back!" ordered the Black Bat. "Back, or I shoot!"

The girl's slow progress did not cease.

"Even the Black Bat would not shoot a woman!" she said mockingly.

NOW she was directly between the Black Bat and the florid man, gambling her very life on the truth of the statement she had just made. And her bluff worked. The Black Bat could not quite—quite exert the pressure that would have sent a slug chewing into the beautiful, lithe body before him.

And with the girl as a willing shield, the florid man acted. There was a gun in his hand now, but he made no attempt to fire it at the Black Bat. Instead, he fired a single quick shot into a small pile of the coarse reddish powder at the far side of the room!

At once, there was a blinding flash, and one huge billow of smoke filled the room.

"Now!" cried Carlotta.

The Black Bat could hear the thud of something being thrown to the floor, and then the steps of the enemy running from the room. The twin .38s barked, and the Black Bat heard a scream of pain. Dunbar reeled backwards into the room, fell against him, but he was already dead.

With fire racing through the room, the Black Bat could think only of Silk now. Swiftly he bent, drew a knife. The blade cut through Silk's bonds. Weaponless, Silk reached for the gun which the florid man had hurled to the floor.

"Let's go!" he cried excitedly.

Together, the Black Bat and his trusted aide dashed down the stairs. Below them they could hear the clomping, running feet of their quarry.

The fire tightened its grip upon the doomed house. The heat beat upon the backs of Silk and the Black Bat as they ran for their lives.

Down three flights more, and at last the door. Behind them the tenement was a seething, churning, bowling mass of red flame.

Butch was on the sidewalk, struggling with a screaming group of immigrants.

"I got 'em out!" he yelled triumphantly. "I told 'em I set the fire, an' then I ran!"

The roomy sedan was roaring away from the curb, and Carol stood on the sidewalk emptying her pistol at it as calmly as though she were engaged in practice on a range.

But it was the gun in Silk's hand that did the trick—the gun which had been thrown down by the florid man. Its chambers were loaded with tracer-bullets, incendiaries. It was one of those bullets which had started the blaze. And now Silk was emptying it after the fleeing sedan.

One of those white-streaked slugs ripped into the lower part of the sedan's rear. There was a flame as the gasoline ignited. Still the occupants of the car might escape—

But there was still a case or two of the incendiary material in the false bottom beneath the rear floorboards of the sedan. The flash was all-engulfing. Where a moment before had been a car was now only a solid mass of flame coasting with awful precision toward a lightpost. The crash sent showers of sparks mushrooming high into the air, Then car and post were nothing but a twisted, horrible mass of molten metal, white-hot in the darkness.

The Black Bat put an arm about Carol's shoulder. She was trembling.

"It's over," he said softly. "And, it was no more than they've done to others, you know!"

He turned toward his own car. "All right, Butch!" he called. "Time to get going!"

The screaming sirens of approaching police cars and fire apparatus were drawing nearer. Two cars moved swiftly away from the scene.

BACK at the house, Tony Quinn and his three aides gathered about a table in the living room. On the table was spread a map of the city. Tony pointed out a series of red pencil marks.

"As you can see," he said, "the red marks follow a definite directional pattern. Each of those marks represents either a burned building or a building which was slated to be burned. There was a definite reason for those fires being in a straight line."

Tony drew a line on the map. It formed an X with the line connecting the red marks which designated the burned buildings.

"Do you know what that line represents?" he asked.

"Yes, sir," Silk put in. "It represents the route of the new crosstown elevated highway which is now being constructed."

Carol's eyes were flashing with comprehension. "Now I'm beginning to see! The elevated highway

could very well have taken another route—a route passing over the red marks!"

"Exactly," nodded Quinn. "The moment there were three fires in a straight line, I began to wonder why. Then the papers came out with the story about a certain city engineer who had invented a formula for incendiary bombs. Weeks seemed a logical choice for that dubious honor, for he was city engineer in a city which was having some extremely strange fires."

"Look," said Butch. "I hate to seem thick, but would you mind starting at the beginning with Weeks and following through on just how much he had to do with the whole business?"

"As a matter of fact," Quinn said, "Weeks had everything to do with it. He wasn't the Boss, of course. But if it hadn't been for Weeks' weakness for gambling, a great many people who are dead might still be alive at this moment.

"Weeks was a gambler, and a bad one. He was unlucky. He owed a lot of money to Landers' Sky Club, and he couldn't pay up. Landers' secret Boss was sore, and no doubt Weeks was told he'd be killed if he didn't produce the money. He was panicky."

"So he had to let Landers and the Boss in on the genteel little racket he'd doped out about the new highway," Carol said.

Tony Quinn looked at the girl with admiration.

"I see you've got it figured out, Carol. And you're right.

"Weeks, as city engineer, drew up the plans for the proposed elevated highway, and he intended to get some friends to go in with him on what was almost a legitimate racket—a plan to buy up property along the proposed route before the route was officially announced and approved. And if the properties were acquired cheaply enough, a neat profit might have been turned in condemnation awards from the city.

"And then, when it was a choice of paying his gambling debts or being liquidated, Weeks offered the proposition to Landers and the Boss. They'd have to put up some more money to buy the properties, of course, but they'd make a profit, and it was the only way they could get the money Weeks owed the Sky Club's tables.

"They went for the deal, and Weeks breathed easier for a while. He submitted his plans for the highway, but the city fathers turned down the route.

"Weeks and his playmates were left with a lot of real estate that wasn't worth even as much as they'd paid for it, because the new legislation requiring fireproof firewalls in tenements had been passed in the meantime."

Butch was chuckling.

"As Butch has guessed, Weeks must have been scared blue. So he gave them the formula. It made beautiful fires that left no tangible clues and offered a neat solution as to what should be done with a lot of worthless buildings— buildings which, incidentally, were still insured under old policies of higher value than the actual worth of the properties."

"And the Acme company," Carol said, "was simply a cover-up."

"Right. The Acme Company had always been a respectable outfit. The Boss bought it up through a dummy, and at an easy price. While Acme conducted its part of the dirty business, it was also engaged in liquidating its legitimate business.

"The Boss was also clever enough to coerce old-time outfits like the Mercy Drug Company into co-operating on insurance blazes. They had the warehouse fire that was supposed to have destroyed a valuable inventory of drugs, and which was really only cartons filled with junk."

"And that guy Berren that they said was watchman in the warehouse," Butch said. "They even collected insurance on him! It looks like pretty nearly anything that happened figured to give them a profit!"

Tony Quinn nodded gravely. "That's the way they had it figured."

"But, Tony, who was the Boss?" Carol said.

"The Boss," said Quinn, "was a man known in sporting circles as Big Jim Morley."

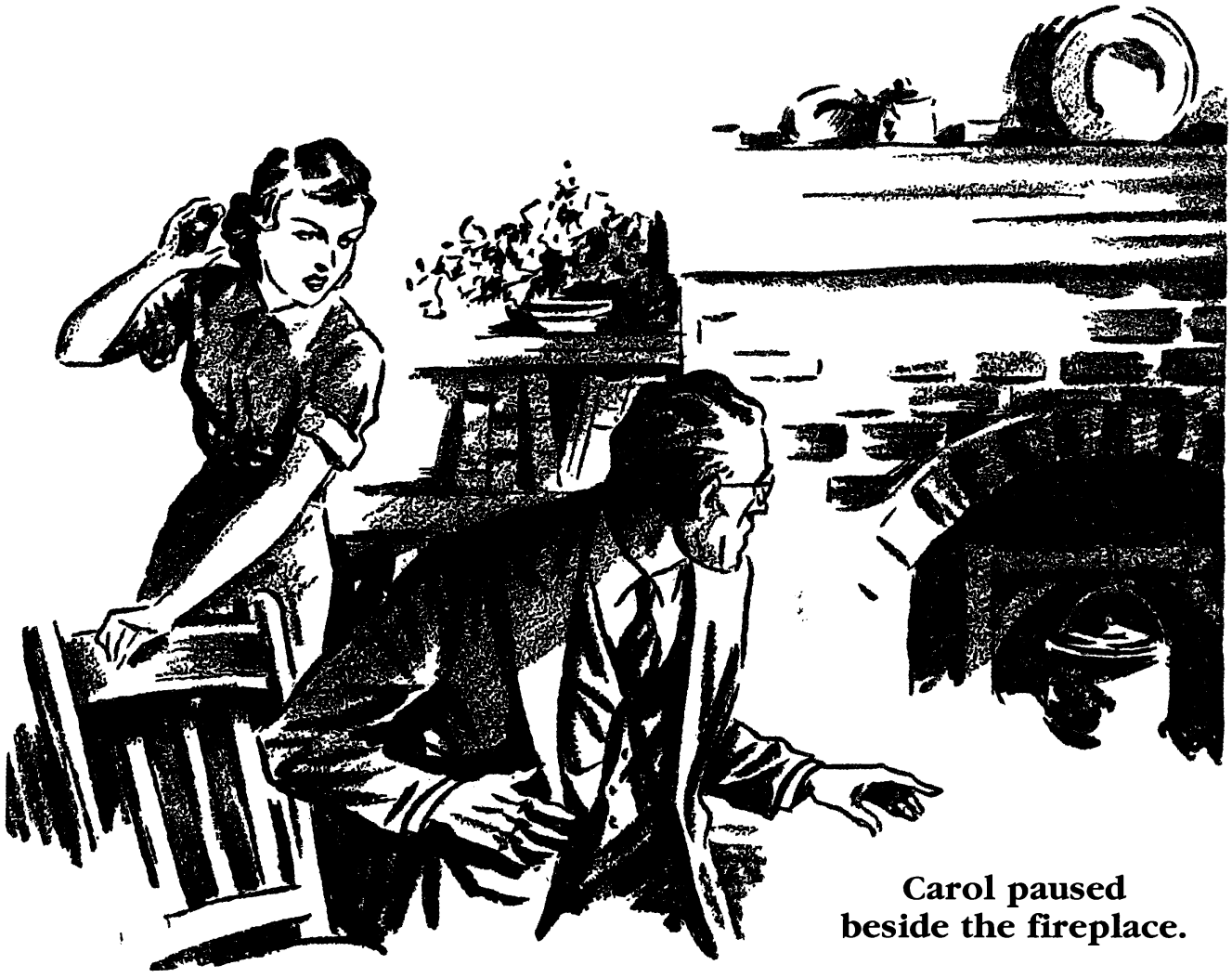
"Wait a minute!" Butch interrupted. "I'm sorry, Quinn, but I'm afraid you're wrong about that. It couldn't have been Morley, because I saw him and Carlotta at the club, and they didn't know each other."

"Naturally they wouldn't recognize each other at the Sky Club," Tony explained patiently. "Morley had Carlotta planted there to watch Landers, and she threw herself at Weeks' head so she could keep her eye on him, too. The Boss wanted to be sure Weeks wouldn't skip town, and he knew Weeks wouldn't do anything or go anyplace without talking about it to the girl with whom he was so infatuated. But Morley was really the big moment in Carlotta's life."

"But how, sir," Silk asked, "how did you know that Morley was the Boss?"

"I didn't know for sure until I saw him, but I was wondering about him. You see, when I was district attorney. there was a case involving the murder of a nightclub owner who was the front for a man we believed to be Big Jim Morley, just as Landers was fronting for Morley in ownership of the Sky Club. The man disappeared, and though we were certain he'd been murdered, his body was never found.

"Hence, we had no case against Morley, even had we been able to establish that he was the actual



Carol paused beside the fireplace.

owner of the club, and that the missing man had held back on some of the receipts. Now, normally there isn't any reason for an owner to keep his identity a secret, particularly from the man who's fronting for him, and as the two cases seemed to parallel in that respect, I wondered if it couldn't be Morley who was behind Landers in the role of the Boss."

"And that's all," said Carol softly.

"Yes, that's all." For a full half minute the little group was silent. Then Silk spoke.

"I think, sir, that a time like this might be a suitable one for all hands to enjoy a short one from your private bottle of Napoleon brandy."

QUINN slapped Silk Kirby soundly on the back. "By all means!"

From the street came the sound of shrieking brakes.

Silk sighed. "I'm afraid it will be necessary for Butch and Miss Carol to repair to the room behind the fireplace for the present. And here, sir, are your dark glasses and your cane. Apparently, we are about to receive a call from Lieutenant McGrath."

"How do you know McGrath's coming here?" Butch demanded.

Silk bent a patient eye upon the large man.

"When a car shrieks to a stop from fifty miles an hour," he said, "you may be reasonably certain it's a police car, and if it stops at this door, you may be even surer that it contains Lieutenant McGrath!"

Then, turning, Silk favored his employer with a broad wink.

"You'd better delay that Napoleon brandy for a while, Silk," Quinn said. "I feel almost good enough to give McGrath a taste of it—almost, but not quite!

"And Butch! Before you go through that fireplace, slip a couple of those cigars of yours into my humidor, will you? I think I'd enjoy seeing McGrath work on one of those!"

Carol paused before the fireplace. Her eyes lingered on the man she loved.

"And me, Tony Quinn? Have you any orders for me?"

Quinn's features softened as he returned her gaze. "Orders for you, Carol? Yes. Remind me, won't you, to tell you how wonderful I think you are—sometime when these two birds aren't around, you know."

And this time, a wink passed between Silk Kirby and Butch O'Brien.

THE END

THE VERSATILE KIN PLATT *by Anthony Tollin*

Rounding out this volume, we present another adventure of the Mask, Nedor's four-color version of the Black Bat (necessitated by the gentleman's agreement between Ned Pines' Standard Publications and DC Comics that averted a potential lawsuit over the similarities between Batman and the Black Bat).

Like most of the Mask's comic book adventures, this story is illustrated (and probably scripted) by Kin Platt, one of the most versatile talents from the Golden Age of Comics—a radio comedy and animation scripter, Hollywood screenwriter and syndicated cartoonist who later became an Edgar Award-winning mystery author.

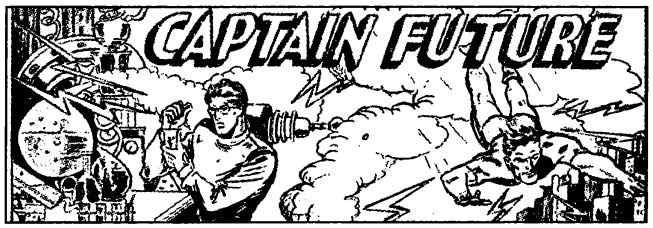
"Kin sort of looked like Groucho Marx and had both Groucho's sense of humor and delivery; a very funny guy," recalled Timely's humor editor Al Jaffee. "He was one of the truly gifted guys in the business, very smart and very talented."

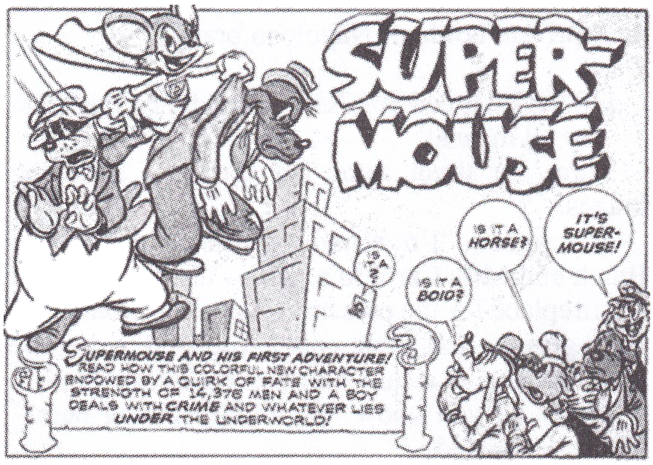
A voracious reader during his childhood, Platt was fond of pulps, especially Western, sports and adventure stories, and by high school was dreaming of a cartooning career.

"I was on my own after finishing high school at nineteen," Platt recalled in his autobiography. "There was no thought of college. To my mind, it was a waste of time and I had to make my living by drawing. A small advertising agency hired me at a few dollars a week. My job was carrying heavy packages to and from the printers. As a bonus, I was paid four dollars for any drawing I made, usually to appear in *Women's Wear*, a garment industry paper.... The *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, an important newspaper of the time, took my first theatrical caricature. It was done in the style of Ralph Barton, a famous caricaturist and satirist of the period, perhaps the greatest ever."

After a stint in Max Fleischer's animation studio, the multi-talented Platt relocated to Hollywood in 1936 to pursue full-time radio work, and wrote radio comedy sketches for Jack Benny, Burns and Allen, Stoopnagle and Budd, Edgar Bergen, Ken Murray and *The National Biscuit Comedy Hour*,

Photo courtesy of Chris Platt





Kin Platt during the 1930s (left) and several of his Nedor comic features

featuring Buddy Rogers and a young Mary Martin. "It didn't take long to discover that although I had an auspicious beginning writing multiple shows, radio comedy for a mass audience of 40 million nightly was not to my liking, nor was it my strength. My kind of humor was soft and droll, offbeat, and sometimes you had to think about it before responding. The radio comedians wanted jokes, especially those repeated enough for audiences to remember and anticipate. Without a repeated laugh response, the comedians faltered and the show died."

Platt next found employment in the story departments of Disney and MGM (where he eventually headed a unit of 32 scriptwriters). However, the lure of newspaper strips eventually caused him to return to New York. "No more typewriter for me, I thought, it's back to the drawing board."

Kin entered the exploding comic book field in 1939 when his 1936-37 newspaper strip "Happy" was reprinted in early issues of Ned Pines' *Best Comics* and *Startling Comics*, and also wrote and illustrated a variety of superhero, detective and humor features for Nedor, Timely and DC Comics.

"Comic books were booming in the 1930s.... I could now combine writing and drawing. I created the superhero Captain Future in comics for Ned Pines, the publisher of [Popular Library]. For Cinema Comics, I did Inferior Man, the weakest man in the world. There was also Supermouse. Oddly, Terrytoons was also creating Supermouse. A bizarre coincidence, but we came out first. They had to change to 'Mighty Mouse.'" (Supermouse was the only non-DC superhero to continue to be published in his own title through the early years of the Silver Age, ending its long run in 1958.)

During World War II, Platt served with the U.S. Army's Air Transport Command in India, earning the Bronze Star. "We had our own newspaper, the *Hump Express*; the Hump was our word for the Himalayas, which stood between us and Tibet, and across the Japanese lines to where our own men were. I drew a weekly panel strip called *Broad Views*, which was mostly girls wearing as little as possible. The chaplains ripped up my pictures, which were collected by the GIs."

Returning to New York after the war, Platt went to work for the New York Herald Tribune Syndicate, producing the "Mr. and Mrs." strip from 1947-63.

"Then in 1950 I introduced a new strip on Sundays, *The Duke and the Duchess*, which was purported to be a comic strip of ideas. Along with general excursions into the world of science and semantics, I took on Joe McCarthy, who was having his day bulldozing and bullying all opposition. I devoted several weeks to exposing his ranting and biased views, but had to stop when the publisher dropped me a note saying, basically, Mr. Platt, if you had been hired for your political opinions, you would be on the editorial page."

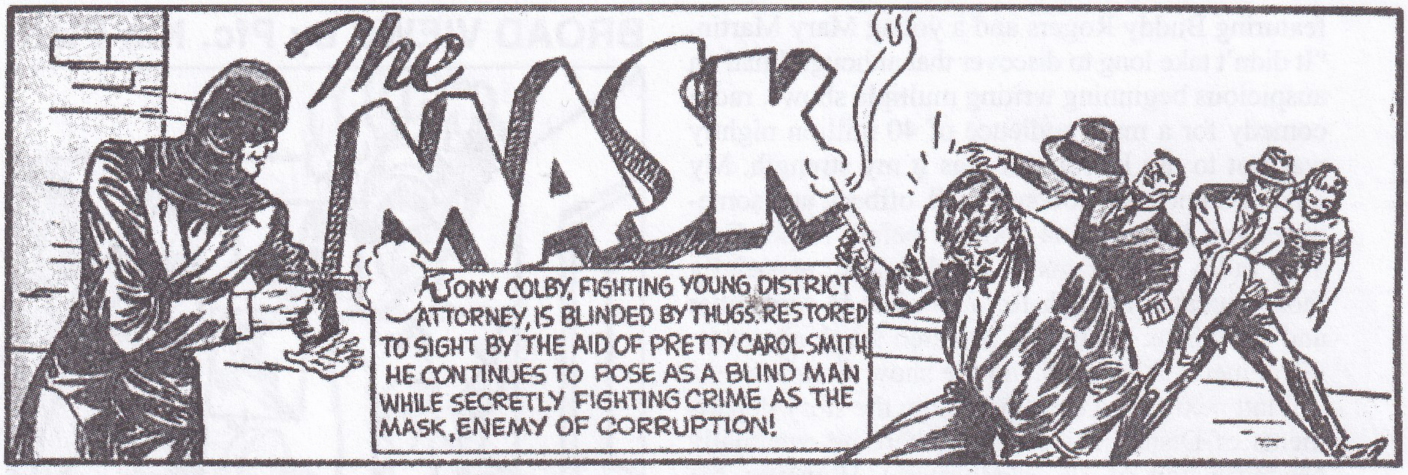
BROAD VIEWS by Pfc. Kin Platt

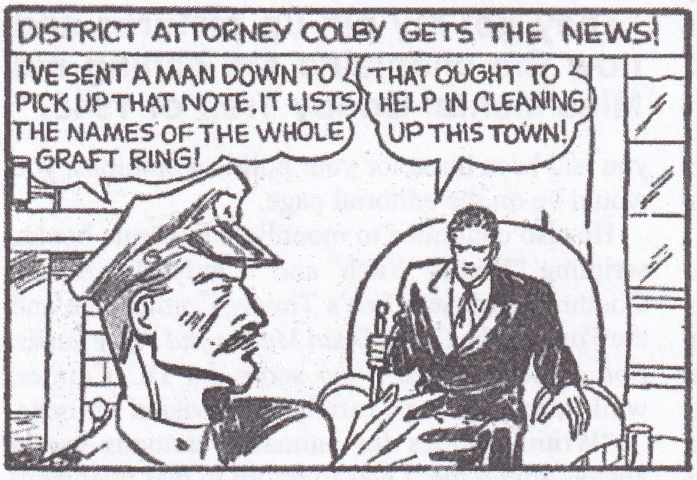
"They got my pin-up pictures and now the chaplains are calling me Miss Mental Booby Trap of 1945."

He also continued to moonlight in comic books, scripting "Widjet Witch" and "Cindy" for Martin Goodman and Stan Lee's Timely Comics line and the *Fox and the Crow*, *Dean Martin and Jerry Lewis*, *Bob Hope* and *Sgt. Bilko* series for DC Comics, while also scripting a variety of television cartoons.

"Writing stories for animated cartoons would always attract me. I was to return to that imaginary world many more times, doing hundreds of feature-lengths and shorts, some award-winning.... These eventually joined those I would do for the Hanna-Barbera studio: the *Top Cat* series, *The Flintstones*, *Jonny Quest*, *The Jetsons*."

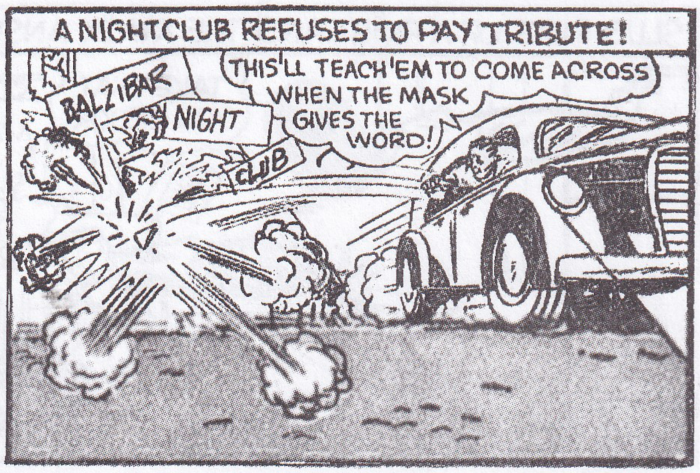
Kin Platt later wrote Young Adult mysteries under a variety of pseudonyms. In 1967, the Mystery Writers of America awarded him its prestigious Edgar Allan Poe Award for Best Juvenile Mystery for *Sinbad and Me*, and he was again nominated in 1970 for *The Mystery of the Witch Who Wouldn't*, while in 1974 the Southern California Council for Children and Young People presented him with its "Distinguished Book of the Year" award for *Chloris and the Creeps*. •

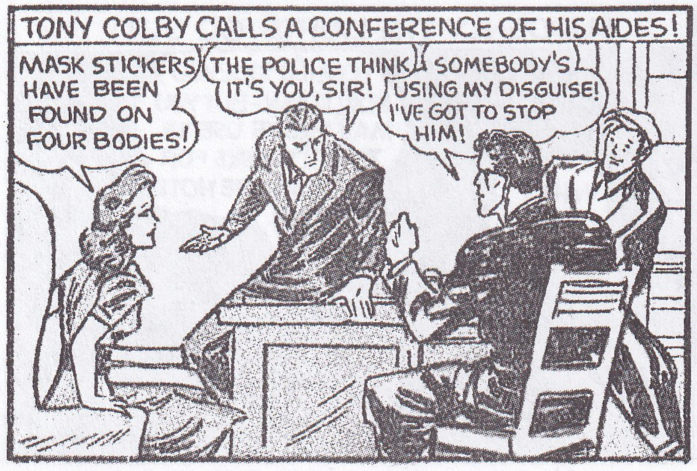


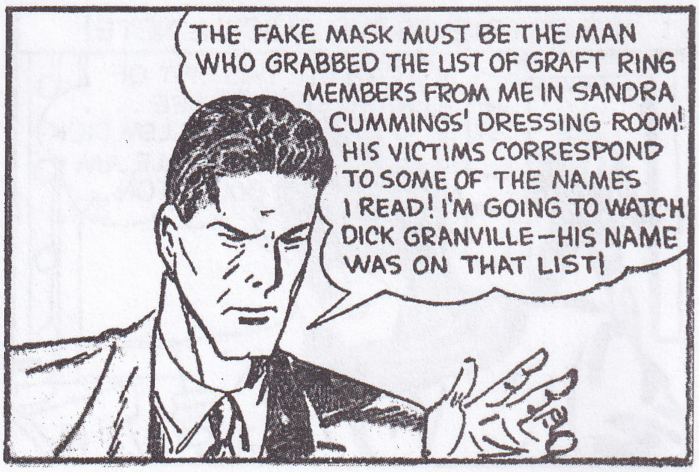


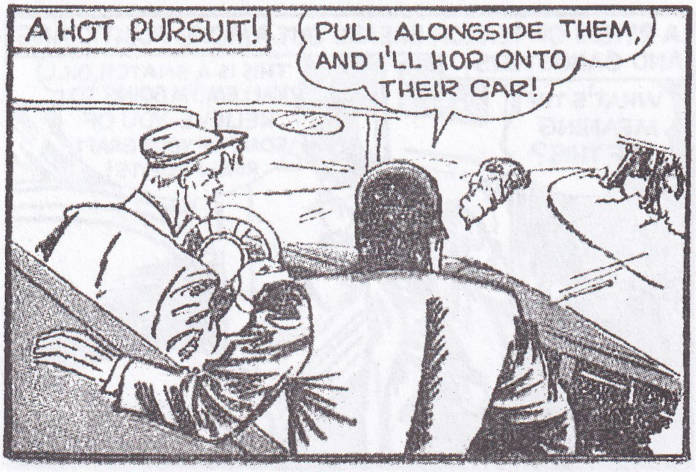
A Golden Age of Comics classic from Volume 1, Number 4 of *Exciting Comics*

illustrated by Kin Platt and inspired by Norman A. Daniels' Black Bat novels









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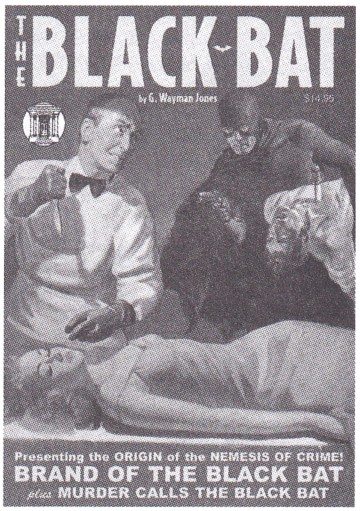

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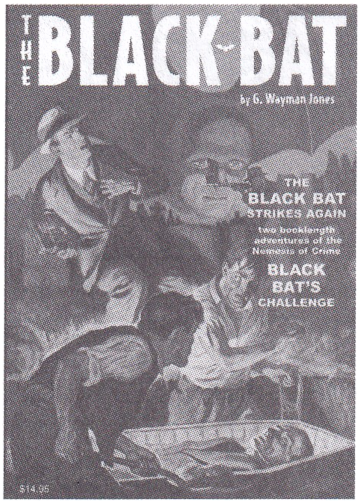

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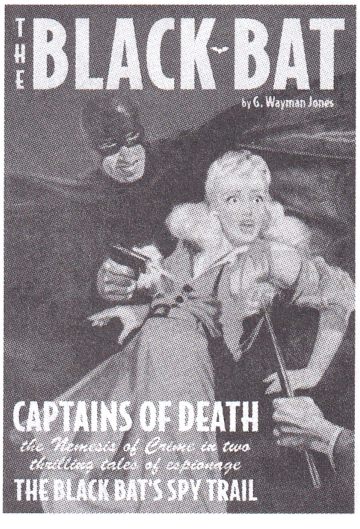

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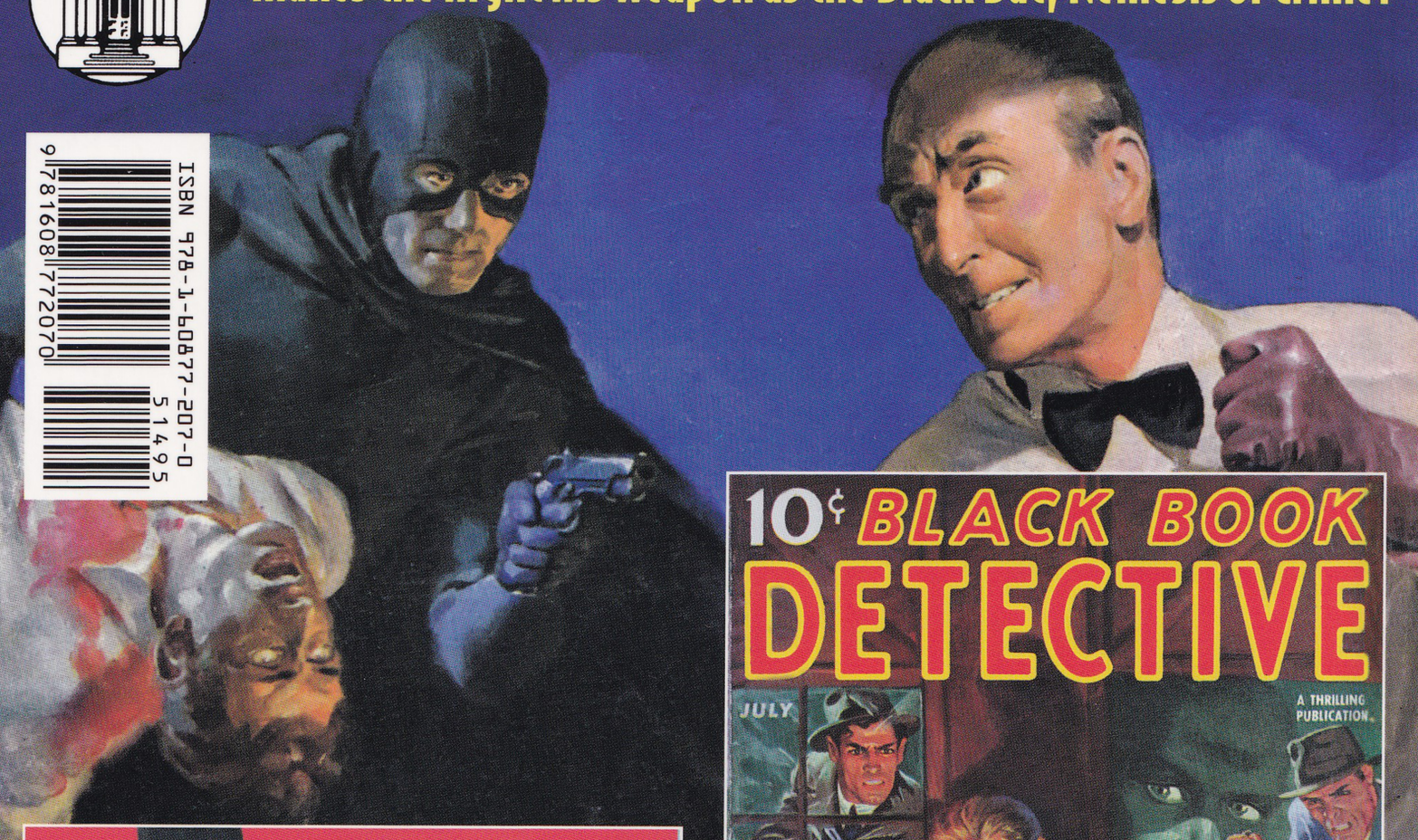

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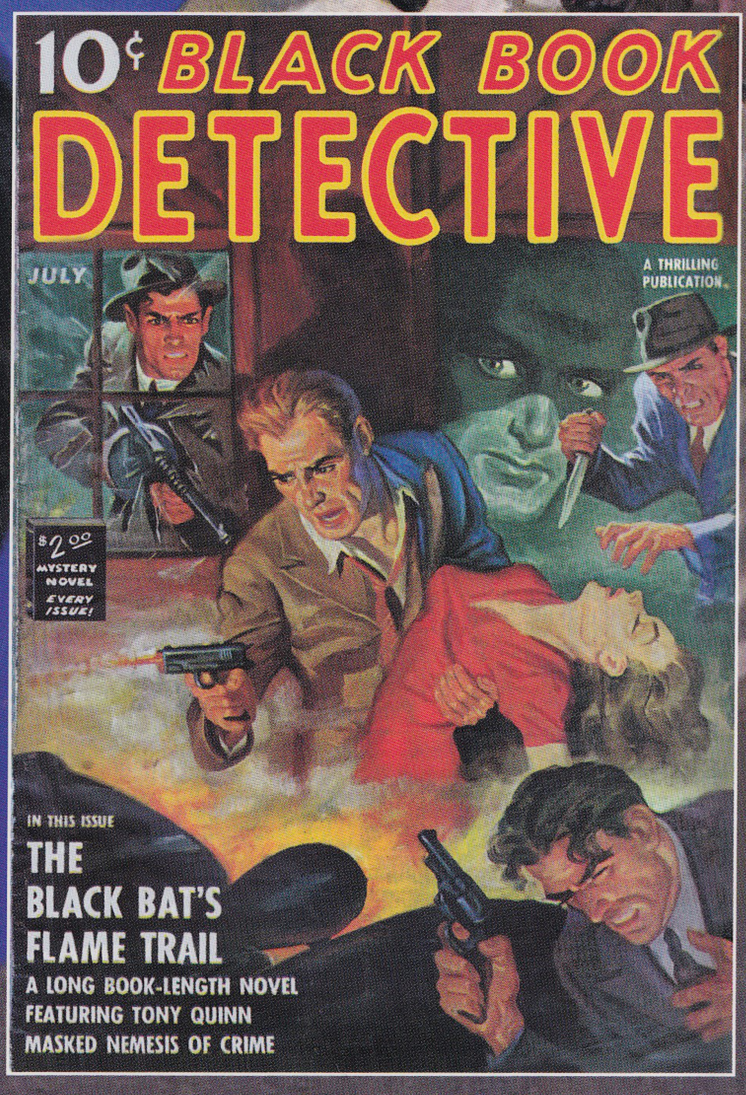

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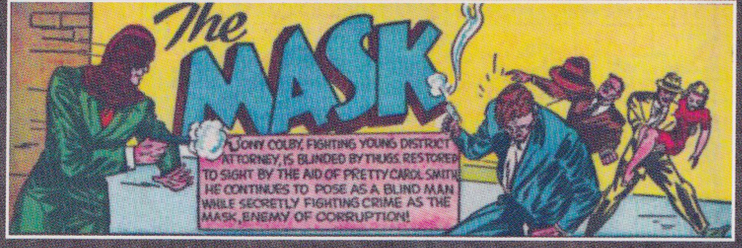
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